Radical queers or queer radicals? Queer activism and the global justice movement

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The year 2000 was hailed as "The Year of the Protest." From N30 to A16 to S26, the turn of the millennium saw a series of multi-issue protests that brought together a range of progressive activists into what some are calling the "convergence" movement. Bursting onto the public radar with the Battle of Seattle in November 1999, the emerging movement set its sights on the World Trade Organization and its sister financial institutions that determine the ground rules for global trade. A broad range of progressive constituencies came together, including the much heralded "Teamsters and Turtles" labor/environmentalist alliance, death penalty opponents, pro-democracy activists, anti-capitalists, and black bloc anarchists, leading Green presidential candidate Ralph Nader to claim, "There's never been an event in American history that has brought together so many disparate groups."

Yet an explicitly queer presence was surprisingly absent at the year's mass actions. While many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (hereafter referred to as "GLBT") people were involved, it was generally as individuals who happened to be queer, rather than as a visible, organized presence waving the rainbow flag. This lack of visibility warrants examination, since queer activists gave birth just a decade ago to a major resurgence of urban activism.

A brief history of radical queer activism

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) came together in New York City in March 1987 to address the mounting death toll within the gay community; chapters

soon sprang up in cities across the United States and Europe. The group resurrected a kind of radical activism that had not been widely seen since the 1970s, imbuing it with their own brand of queer style and sensibility. "United in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis," ACT UP engaged in office occupations, road blockades, and demonstrations at international AIDS conferences and the head-quarters of government bureaucracies.

In its early years ACT UP served a dual purpose as an AIDS activist and a queer liberation group. But tension between these roles was always present, and soon led to the formation of Queer Nation (QN), a new group specifically grounded in queer identity politics. The unabashedly pro-queer group organized kiss-ins, anti-bashing actions, and protests against homophobic officials and institutions. As had happened before in male-dominated progressive groups, some women within ACT UP and QN wanted to focus on their own issues, and in 1992 the struggles against sexism and homophobia came together under the banner of the Lesbian Avengers (see Schulman interview, below).

From its early days there was debate within ACT UP about whether its proper focus was solely HIV/AIDS or the social and economic context surrounding the epidemic. ACT UP brought together both long-term queer activists who saw AIDS activism as a way to link queer liberation with a broader social justice agenda, and assimilated gay white men who had been shaken out of their complacency by the deadly virus and were now literally fighting for their lives. As the 1990s progressed, several ACT UP chapters began to fall apart. In New York, ACT UP's Treatment and Data Group spun off to form the Treatment Action Group (TAG). In 1990, ACT UP/San Francisco split into two groups, one of which (ACT UP/Golden Gate, later renamed Survive AIDS) focused on treatment advocacy, while the other was determined to work on a wider range of issues. The treatment advocacy groups lost much of their radical edge as their members gained seats at the table with the very university researchers, government officials, and pharmaceutical company representatives they had once screamed at from the streets.

By the late 1990s most ACT UP chapters were moribund. A major exception is ACT UP/Philadelphia, which successfully made the transition from a single-issue, gay-identity-based group to an inclusive social justice organization that has taken an active role in the convergence movement. Although much smaller than during its heyday, ACT UP/New York remains active in a variety of causes, and veterans of the

group have spearheaded several subsequent activist efforts. The tiny ACT UP/East Bay has consistently maintained a broad, social justice focus. By the mid 1990s most of the original members of ACT UP/SF had left the group, and the name was assumed by so-called AIDS dissidents, who believe that HIV does not cause AIDS and that antiretroviral drugs are poisons that cause the symptoms associated with the syndrome. Although strongly grounded in queer identity politics, ACT UP/San Francisco and other dissident chapters have been involved in actions supporting animal rights, opposing the execution of Mumia Abu-Jamal, and other progressive issues shared with the convergence movement.

The mainstreaming of a movement

The emergence and decline of ACT UP and QN took place in the context of a changing gay movement (the "L" would not be widely added until the 1980s; the "B" and "T" not until the 1990s). As GLBT people gained mainstream acceptance, the movement lost its radical edge and became increasingly assimilationist (for a history of the early gay liberation movement and its shift toward assimilationism, see Bronksi 1998; Duberman 1999; Teal 1971).

The post-Stonewall gay liberation movement was about "releasing the homosexuality in heterosexuals, and the heterosexuality in homosexuals" — that is, developing a novel approach to the very way sexual identity is conceptualized. Both gay liberation and the feminist movement of the same era offered a critique of traditional gender roles, the nuclear family, marriage, and compulsory monogamy, and both made common cause with progressive movements of the day, including anti-war activists, free-speech proponents, and advocates for "Third World" liberation.

By the mid 1970s, however, the gay movement had increasingly come to adopt a civil rights, identity politics model. In a diary entry from the early 1970s, gay activist and historian Martin Duberman (1999) wrote "I feared that the net effect might be to win recognition of gay people as a legitimate minority, but a minority wedded to dominant mainstream values. A new world would not be ushered in, but the old world reaffirmed — with the addition of a few prosperous, well-educated, middle-class white queers." It is a critique echoed by queer radicals today (see Shepard 2001).

With the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, large national GLBT groups such as the

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) and the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) intensified their quest for a place at the mainstream table, focusing on same-sex marriage, gay inclusion in the military, "hate crime" laws, and increasing the economic and political clout of the GLBT community. With a Democratic administration in the White House that gave lip service to GLBT concerns, many gay men and lesbians traded in their sticker-covered leather jackets and combat boots for neckties and sensible pumps.

Paralleling the mainstreaming of the GLBT political agenda was an increased commodification of the gay identity. This increasing consumerism encouraged the movement to play down its radical edges to position itself as a more attractive market. As Tom Thomson (2001) notes, "It's not surprising that the thorough interconnection of corporate power and queer activism has discouraged the development of even mild critiques of capitalism and state power within queer political discourse."

At this point in the GLBT movement's evolution, it's worth asking whether gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people are in fact a progressive constituency. Identity-based movements bring people together on the basis of shared characteristics and oppressions, and often expect that their members will share certain moral values, political beliefs, and cultural tastes. But as societal oppression declines, there is less to hold an otherwise disparate identity group together.

As GLBT people gain mainstream acceptance, many feel a decreased need or desire to align themselves with marginalized groups or radical causes. By now, many GLBT people have well-paid professional jobs, and have no interest in abolishing capitalism. Others want to join the legislature or the military, and have no interest in overthrowing the government. Still others desire a monogamous marriage and children, and see little reason to challenge traditional ideas about relationships and families. While progressive queers often argue, for example, that the GLBT movement should support adequate welfare, tenants' rights, and labor issues because many GLBT people are poor or working class, it makes as much sense to suggest that the GLBT movement should support a capital gains tax cut because many GLBT people are wealthy. One often hears gay conservatives described as a contradiction in terms. Yet based on exit poll data from the November 2000 election, an estimated 25 percent of GLBT people voted for Republican candidate George W. Bush; clearly, conservative gays are no longer a fringe element, if indeed they ever were.

Queer radicals today face a dilemma. Should we try to steer the mainstream GLBT movement in a more progressive direction, or work with other progressive activists in groups that are not queer-focused? Can – and should – a movement focused on gay and lesbian identity expand to encompass a full range of progressive causes? And how can a movement organized around sexual identity embrace the intersecting identities of gay men and lesbians (and bisexuals? and transgendered people?) who are also women, people of color, disabled, youth, or working class?

Progressive queer activists have had some degree of success in pushing the main-stream GLBT movement to adopt progressive causes. The NGLTF has responded favorably to critiques that it has not been sufficiently inclusive of bisexuals, transgendered people, people of color, and queer youth. The organization has been persuaded to take stands against the Gulf War, the death penalty, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process, which included many long-term radical gay and lesbian activists, encouraged greater grassroots participation in the planning of the April 2000 Millennium March on Washington, an event Ben Shepard (2001) characterizes as "a profound chasm within the movement itself."



ACT UP with "Anti-Racist Skinheads & Punx against Homophobia" at LGTB march on Washington, 1993. Even as gay left institutions such as Gay Community News have dissolved in recent years, queer activists have continued to address progressive issues from a queer-identity-based perspective. Queer Watch, a small group formed in 2000, was able to persuade several national GLBT groups to sign an anti-death penalty statement. GLBT working people continue to organize, forming queer labor groups such as Pride at Work. Progressive queer groups exist in several US cities, including Boston's Queer Revolt, San Francisco's Lesbian and Gay Insurrection (LAGAI), Chicago's Queer to the Left, Queers for Racial and Economic Justice, and a new network calling itself the Queer Liberation Front, after the post-Stonewall group of the same name. Yet on the whole, the queer progressive/left tendency remains small, and has failed to capture the imagination of the broader GLBT community.

One of the most visible factions of the contemporary radical queer milieu is the transgender (TG) movement, which has taken many people by surprise with the sheer speed and magnitude of its growth in the 1990s. Although it is in many respects an identity-based movement for transgendered, transsexual, and intersex people, some activists (such as GenderPAC) advocate an expanded scope that includes all people affected by gender-based oppression. While the gender movement has its assimilationist elements, activist groups like Transexual Menace and TransAction have



ACT UP Women, with Black Block at 1992 Pro-Choice March in Washington.

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followed in the footsteps of ACT UP, engaging in direct action and street protest to call attention to issues such as violence and police brutality against gender-variant people.

The post-Stonewall gay liberation movement advocated a broad sexual and gender liberation agenda, which shared similarities with the "sexual revolution" of the same era and with the "free love" movement dating back to the late nineteenth century. But today there is little emphasis on sex within most of the GLBT civil rights movement. Repeal of sodomy laws has been accorded a low priority by the GLBT establishment. A group called SexPanic! formed in 1997 to counter the demonization of queer sex – attacks that were often coming from assimilationist gay men and lesbians as well as from the religious right and the straight establishment (see essay by Eigo below, and by Shepard in part 3). But the group never succeeded in mobilizing large segments of the GLBT population.

Sex workers have become increasingly organized and active in the 1990s, demanding reform of laws that punish consensual commercial sex. Aided greatly by the Internet, sadomasochist/BDSM social, support, and activist groups have sprung up in large cities and small towns across the country. Polyamory groups, proponents of responsible non-monogamy, and advocates for nontraditional relationships, are increasingly visible. But there is really no all-encompassing sexual and gender liberation movement that has succeeded in bringing together elements such as the leather community, fetishists, polyamorists, sex workers, producers and consumers of pornography, and advocates for the sexual self-determination of youth. Today the "sex activist" label is most often applied to those who write and teach about sexual technique or who do art and performance related to their own sexual experience, and there is little emphasis on connecting sexual and gender issues to a broader social justice agenda. Many pro-sex advocates seem to feel that if they have attended the latest orgy, they have done their part for social change.

What do we want? Everything!

In the absence of a strong queer progressive or sexual and gender liberation movement, some queer radicals have opted to devote their energies to the new convergence activism. Activists from many different struggles – some previously unaware of each others' existence – emerged from the fog of tear gas in Seattle as a real movement,

albeit one that has so far resisted adopting a particular name or a specific agenda. The global financial institutions are perhaps the ideal impetus to bring so many different activists together. In promoting free trade at all costs, they run roughshod over national and local laws regarding consumer safety and environmental protection. In advocating the free movement of capital and goods – but not of workers or consumers – they encourage corporations to shift production to the poorest countries, creating a race to the bottom that impoverishes workers in the developing world while undermining labor in developed countries. With their structural adjustment policies, they impose cutbacks in health care, education, and other social services. In their very workings, they are undemocratic, with decisions made by a small elite rather than those who are most directly affected. Under the banner of "neoliberalism," the gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened as power and wealth are concentrated in ever fewer hands.

The recent upsurge in activism has occasioned a flood of ink (see the essay by Klein in part 4, and other essays in this volume), but a few notable features of the new movement should be mentioned here. The convergence movement prides itself on its grassroots, leaderless structure and its flexible tactics. Like the radical queer activism of the 1990s, the convergence movement has borrowed heavily from anarchist and feminist principles, which reject hierarchy and value broad participation and consensus decision-making. It insists on a consistency of means and ends. As described by Cindy Milstein of the Institute for Social Ecology, "We're not putting off the good society until some distant future, but attempting to carve out room for it in the here and now." The convergence movement derives its strength from the concerted efforts of multiple autonomous individuals and affinity groups working without a centralized platform or leadership — potentially a great advantage, since authorities cannot decapitate a movement that has no head.

Like the radical queer activists – and like the Zapatistas, whom many credit with kicking off the struggle against neoliberalism five years before Seattle – the convergence movement has mastered the means of communication, using eye-catching visuals and sophisticated technologies to disseminate their message outside the control of the mainstream, corporate media (see the essay by Nogueira in part 4). "For once in a political protest," says veteran activist Starhawk (see essay in part 1), "when we chanted 'the whole world is watching!' we were telling the truth." In addition to using email and the Web to plan and coordinate every aspect of their

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work, convergence activists also use the Internet to conduct "cyber actions" such as email "zaps" of global corporations and government officials – the latest version of the phone and fax "zaps" pioneered by ACT UP (see interview with Dominguez in part 4).

It is too early to forecast the fate of the convergence movement. As Alexander Cockburn notes, "Once in a generation you can catch the ruling class off guard. Then you spend twenty years paying for it" (Cockburn et al. 2000). The movement has already met a level of repression that is unusual at such an early stage, facing increased police mobilization, stepped-up surveillance and infiltration, and stiffer jail sentences. For a truly anti-authoritarian movement to be successful, it cannot rely on brute force to overthrow "the system" or make people fall into line. Rather, it must persuade people that its goals are in their own best interest. The convergence movement has tapped into a popular sentiment against growing corporate domination. Now it must find ways to bring the global struggles home and show how they are relevant to people's everyday lives and, perhaps most important, must better define what it's for as well as what it's against.

Where was the rainbow in Seattle?

While the queer presence at last year's convergence actions may have seemed minimal, the influence of queer and AIDS activists has nevertheless been considerable. With their queer sensibility and mastery of the media, queer activists attracted a greater share of attention than their small numbers would otherwise warrant, and the influence of radical queer groups can be seen in many non-queer activist organizations. At the WTO protest in Seattle the sight of a small group of Lesbian Avengers topless in the cold rain was among the most memorable images.

Many of the most active queer participants within the convergence movement are veterans of ACT UP, QN, and their sister groups. In general, these activists came to the queer and AIDS movements from a background of social justice activism; the queer presence within the convergence movement does not include a large proportion of HIV-positive activists. In a testament to their high degree of influence, queer and AIDS activists have been among the most visible and active coordinators of actions (though no one dares call them "leaders"). In fact, at the Republican National Convention protest in Philadelphia last summer, three ACT UP/Philadelphia mem-

bers were arrested as "ringleaders" and held on unprecedented bails as high as \$1 million.

Nowhere is the synergy between AIDS activism and the struggle against global corporate domination more evident than in the fight for affordable AIDS drugs for poor countries. Multinational pharmaceutical companies have used the patent and intellectual property laws of the WTO and individual countries to block the local manufacture or importation of cheap generic anti-HIV drugs in developing countries such as South Africa and Brazil. There could hardly be a better example of corporations putting profits before people. Activists from ACT UP/Philadelphia, ACT UP/New York, and South Africa's Treatment Action Coalition – along with non-AIDS-focused groups such Médecins sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders and Nader's Consumer Project on Technology – came together to form the Health Global Access Project (Health GAP) Coalition, which has spearheaded activism in support of drug access (see essay by Sawyer in part 1 and the Introduction). Such efforts have already resulted in reduced drug prices, reams of negative publicity for the pharmaceutical companies, and an agreement by one company to allow off-patent production of its AIDS drugs.

Barriers to queer inclusion

Given the resistance of the mainstream GLBT movement to addressing progressive issues outside the realm of gay identity politics, one might ask why more queer radicals are not active in the convergence movement. Does it make more sense to join forces with the progressive multi-issue movement rather than trying to influence the GLBT movement? Might we have more success persuading the convergence movement to embrace sexual and gender liberation than in convincing the GLBT movement to embrace non-queer progressive causes? Who are our best allies, mainstream and conservative GLBT people, or progressive and radical heterosexuals?

The lack of a visible and organized queer presence in the convergence movement is a "Catch 22" similar to that described by Elizabeth Martinez in her analysis of the absence of people of color. Queers are not eager to participate in the movement because it doesn't include enough queers; the movement does not include enough queers because queers are not eager to participate. The fact that some of its most visible members are queer or AIDS activists has received little notice. Is it a positive

development that the presence of out queers is seen as unremarkable, or is it a sign of a reluctance to acknowledge the role of queers in the movement?

The convergence movement is, on the whole, quite queer-friendly. Most non-queer progressives include homophobia in their laundry lists of issues. However, queer issues - and sexual and gender issues more broadly - are not a high priority for a majority of non-queer activists. In part this is due to a hostility - especially among older white male leftists - towards identity-based organizing in general, what Duberman (1999) describes as a "horde of disgruntled, righteous, straight leftists" who "deplore the derailing of class struggle (and their own leadership) for the trivial selftherapies of 'imagined' identity politics." Some leftists argue that a focus on identity takes attention away from the class and economic issues they feel are paramount. Some still harbor the belief that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are outgrowths of capitalism, and that we must first abolish capitalism in order to liberate people of color, women, and queers. In reality, these "isms" preceded capitalism and exist under a variety of economic and political systems, and other societal forces (such as religion) have played as great a role in propping up racism, sexism, and homophobia. There is little reason to assume that these "isms" would not persist in a post-capitalist, poststatist society unless they are actively confronted and eradicated from the outset.

But queers face additional difficulties that go beyond those of other identity groups. Progressive thinking has evolved with regard to racism and sexism, and most now agree that the issues of people of color and women are integral to the larger project of achieving social justice. The convergence movement is roughly half women, has adopted feminist principles, and recognizes that global corporate domination disproportionately affects women worldwide. Although people of color are still not present in the movement in proportion to their numbers in the population (see Martinez 1999; Crass 2000), issues of racism are widely acknowledged, as is the fact that people of color bear the brunt of corporate exploitation and environmental devastation. But when it comes to queers, the issues of sexuality and gender are still downplayed. There remains a sense among some on the left that issues of sex, sexuality, desire, and gender are frivolous, a luxury of the privileged or a waste of time. They are seen as private rather than public, and are associated with leisure rather than work. Usually whites can work against racism and men against sexism without their own identity being called into question; however, heterosexuals (especially men) who work for queer liberation must confront the risk of being seen as queer themselves, a prospect that remains highly threatening for many radical men. Add to this the pervasive American erotophobia that regards sexual issues as distasteful and those who draw attention to them as somewhat suspect.

Despite this, parts of the traditional socialist left have made considerable progress in including queers and queer issues. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sectarian socialist and communist groups were more or less forced to seek alliance with radical queers, who were at the time the most visible face of militant urban activism. What may have started out as opportunism has in some cases evolved into real alliances, as socialist activists worked together with queers and began to rethink their outmoded ideas about homosexuality and other forms of sexual and gender nonconformity as symptoms of "bourgeois decadence." Various groups, such as the Democratic Socialists of America, now have queer caucuses; the Workers World Party has become an outspoken supporter of GLB and especially transgender causes, and the sponsor of Rainbow Flags for Mumia through its International Action Center. However, while some traditional leftist groups have accepted GLBT as a marginalized identity, others remain squeamish about queer liberation struggles, especially those that explicitly involve sex. And a few continue to oppose queer identity and (especially male) same-sex relations; these include the Revolutionary Communist Party, which states in its program, "education will be conducted throughout society on the ideology behind homosexuality and its material roots in exploiting society, and struggle will be waged to eliminate it and reform homosexuals."

Some so-called Third World revolutionary groups have also developed a new attitude in regard to queers, a marked departure from earlier movements in China, Cuba, and elsewhere. For example, the Zapatistas consistently link their cause with the struggles of all marginalized people. Subcomandante Marcos (1994), responding to speculation that he was homosexual, proclaimed:

Marcos is gay in San Francisco, black in South Africa, Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Ysidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, a Mayan Indian in the streets of San Cristobal ... a woman alone in the Metro at 10 [p.m.] ... an underground editor, an unemployed worker ... a non-conformist student, a dissident against neoliberalism ... and of course a Zapatista in the mountains of southeastern Mexico.

Likewise, the once anti-gay African National Congress in South Africa marked the end of the apartheid era in 1994 when it adopted the first national constitution that explicitly included sexual orientation.

The age and gender diversity of the convergence movement, as well as its large anarchist/anti-authoritarian element, help promote a queer-positive atmosphere. Anarchism – along with feminism – has long been concerned with breaking down the artificial barriers between the public and the private spheres. The anarchist tradition embraces play as eagerly as it does work: remember "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." It values personal freedom as well as social justice. In addition, younger activists – whether homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, or refusing labels altogether – have grown up in a more queer-accepting culture and widely embrace more fluid conceptualizations of sexuality and gender; few are as concerned as their elders with reifying identity-based categories.

The lack of queer participation in the convergence movement cannot be laid entirely at the feet of clueless heterosexual activists. Many queers — especially those who have had experience working with homophobic straight leftists — distrust (or even dislike) heterosexuals and are more comfortable organizing within the queer ghetto. Radical queers must combat heterosexism within the convergence movement by being visible and by overcoming the urge to put off addressing our issues as sexual and gender minorities. In addition, we must encourage the developing movement to resist alliances with unrepentant homophobes, and insist that we not be hidden in the closet in a misguided attempt to make the movement more comfortable for union members, communities of color, and others presumed to be less tolerant of queers.

Heterosexual progressives can be the best allies of radical queers in areas where the mainstream GLBT establishment fears to tread. Heterosexual anarchists and some socialists have a long tradition of critiquing marriage, monogamy, the nuclear family, and accepted notions of child-rearing. Non-queer groups such as the ACLU have taken the most principled stands on freedom of sexual expression, while the mainstream GLBT movement has increasingly adopted censorship tactics. Leadership in struggles against the death penalty, police brutality, and the unjust prison system has come from non-gay groups such as Amnesty International and the Quakers, while the GLBT establishment pushes for "hate crime" laws. As mainstream GLBT "leaders" have become more visible, some heterosexual progressives have come to believe that these "leaders" speak for all queers. They fear that oppos-

ing positions espoused by the GLBT establishment will be viewed as homophobic; queer radicals must make it clear that this is not the case.

Although identity-based politics has accomplished a great deal in making the progressive movement – and society as a whole – aware of the issues and concerns of marginalized groups, we may have to move beyond identity politics to advance on a broad-based progressive social justice agenda. In an ideal world, the need for activism based on race, sex, or sexual orientation may become a thing of the past, but the movement is clearly not there yet.

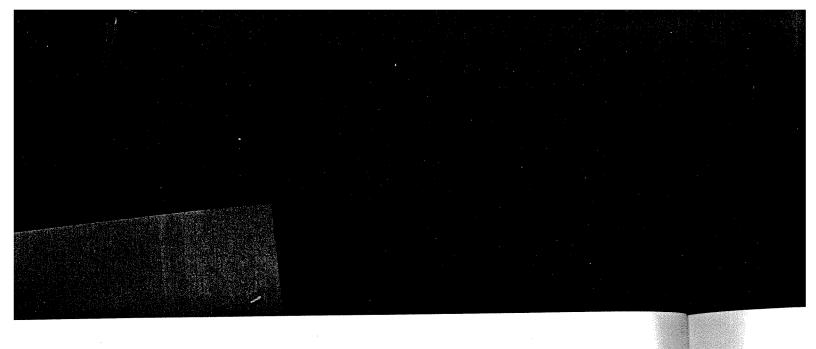
Radical queers and heterosexuals alike should understand that GLBT people do not – and should not – have a monopoly on issues of sexuality, desire, and gender. As Duberman (1999) notes, the queer movement has developed a body of thought concerning

the historicity and fluidity of sexual desire, the performative nature of gender, and the complex multiplicity of attractions, fantasies, impulses and narratives that lie within us all....To understand how and why sexual and gender identities get socially constructed is to open up a new way of talking about politics, about how relations of power get established, [and] about the role of the state in reinforcing and policing that set of relations in the name of maintaining the stakes of the already privileged.

Just as issues of race must be addressed by white people and issues of sex and gender must be addressed by men, issues of sexuality and desire must be addressed by heterosexuals – not as a way for the dominant group to "help" the marginalized, but because social inequalities and stereotypes negatively affect all of us.

Radical queers have succeeded in harnessing erotic/sexual energy to enliven their activism in a unique way; indeed, this is part of what is meant by "queer sensibility." Such energy makes radical queer activism exciting and compelling, and keeps activists motivated and involved. As it stands, the introduction of an erotic component into non-queer activism tends to feel oppressive to many women and to bring out the worst competitive macho tendencies in some men, but perhaps in the future people of all genders and sexual orientations will be able to marshal this life-affirming force against the forces of death we confront in our struggles for justice.

Finally, we must never lose sight of the fact that on a worldwide basis, a majority of people are unable to live openly queer lives or to explore alternative gender roles or different relationship and family structures due to harsh material conditions. The



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struggle against global corporate domination directly contributes to the queer struggle, because sexual, economic, and social liberation must go hand in hand.

Note

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