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LGBTQ politics

Queering Anti-Capitalist Organizing

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These are challenging times for the anti-capitalist left. Despite the enormous attacks being waged in the name of austerity, there is little in the way of sustained resistance in the streets, workplaces, neighborhoods, or schools. The Left's limited resources are being strained to the limits in struggles to organize against the tide.

Many anti-capitalists have responded to this strain by trying to do more of the same with fewer resources. In activist organizations and radical political groupings there is tremendous pressure to intensify our efforts to resist changes that will be devastating for so many. I want to argue here that sheer effort will not reverse the increasing marginalization of the left. Instead, this is a moment where we need to be learning, from our activist experiments and from a shared analysis of the character of these times.

There have been very real changes in work, life, and politics over the last 30 years as a result of neoliberal restructuring that mean we cannot simply use our old maps to develop strategy. Further, the older maps of the left had definite limits and exclusions that meant they did not provide an integrated picture of capitalist society as it is organized around gender, racialization, colonialism, sexuality, or ecological devastation. One dimension of this process of remapping is queering anti-capitalist politics, examining them from the perspective of those who have tended to be marginalized within the dominant perspectives on the left. The accomplishment of a genuine queering of anti-capitalist organizing will require ongoing decolonization of our theories and methods of organizing.

From gay to queer

I am drawing a parallel here between anti-capitalist organizing and my own experiences in queer activism. In my own lifetime, queers have gone from being Cold War outsiders to symbols of Western values in the so called "war on terror." Where once the Canadian state invested resources in the development of a "fruit machine" capable of identifying homosexuals so they could be fired, now right-wing cabinet ministers present themselves as friends of lesbians and gays in Iran and Uganda.

It requires a dynamic politics, transformed by genuine learning, to sustain a liberation perspective through these changes. It is easy to end up on the wrong side of history, as we see from the prominent lesbians and gays who actively support islamophobia and the pink-washing of Israel, hiding its record of occupation and oppression behind a claim of modernity based on a liberal approach to gay rights.

The development of a genuine liberation perspective on gender and sexuality has required serious and often painful rethinking along the way. The first time I personally encountered this was around the exclusion of lesbians. In the 1970s, the term "gay" proclaimed a politically-charged identity, in contrast to the official 'homosexual' used in the media and by medical authorities. But lesbians pointed out that "gay" was not inclusive, even though it was often used as if it were.

Genuine inclusion meant not only adding the word "lesbian" to organizational names, but also a serious engagement with the experiences and political projects of lesbians. It is perhaps too easy as a gay man to feel you are the opposite of masculinity, having been bullied and beaten up for failing at it. But male dominance can take many forms, even among men who might not be thought of as traditionally masculine.

Gay liberation politics were dominated by a kind of sexual libertarianism deeply committed to a freedom struggle against the various forms of repression from the medical professions, the cops, religion, the media, and the family. In contrast, lesbian feminism engaged far more with the politics and experiences of caregiving, including child-rearing. It also insisted on understanding the ways power was expressed in sexual activity, while gay male libertarianism often cast sexual activity itself as an almost utopian realm of freedom. A deeper politics of emancipation required a genuine engagement with both sexual libertarianism and lesbian feminism, recognizing that while neither was adequate in itself, it would not do to casually dismiss either of these perspectives.

In the later 1980s, the term "queer" was widely adopted in the more radical wing of sex/gender liberation movements in response to the inadequate political response to the AIDS epidemic among mainstream lesbian and gay organizations. Queer politics identified the exclusions in lesbian and gay institutions, as transpeople, most women, people of colour and working class or poor people found themselves shunted to the margins of spaces increasingly defined by professionals and business people.

The post-9/11 "war on terror" showed the need to take this process of queering further, as it made evident the problematic character of lesbian and gay politics that are not also anti-racist and anti-imperialist. Western governments were suddenly using the defense of women's rights as well as those of lesbians and gays to justify imperialist invasions abroad and islamophobia at home.

To address these issues, queer movements needed to learn from anti-racist and anti-imperialist sexual politics. Racialized queers and many in the Global South had long criticized the false inclusiveness of gay and lesbian rights, which used the experience of specific layers of white gay men in the imperialist nations as the supposedly universal standard for sexual freedom, ignoring the wide range of same-gender sexual practices and sex/gender freedom struggles in different cultures and classes around the world. Activist queers needed to confront the limits of the movement, learning from experiences and perspectives of queers of colour.

For a long time, I thought my goal in the politics of gender and sexual liberation was to get it right. Now, I think this is an ongoing process of learning as important changes in the world in combination with the voices of those outside the frame of our limited perspectives demand that we move beyond the limits of our established politics.

Learning through engagement

This ongoing work of crafting and remaking an integrated liberation politics by learning through genuine engagement with perspectives generated outside our frame has not necessarily been the dominant model of anti-capitalist organizing through the 20th century. Anti-capitalists of many stripes often act as if the major lessons are behind us, learned in the early 20th century and refined through the subsequent evolution of whichever political lineage it is that you identify with. As a result we have lost the ability to even understand the working class as it actually is, as opposed to the hypothetical class conjured up in our theories, whose capacities sit intact but latent waiting for us to construct the ideal organizational form.

The resistance capacities of the working class have atrophied and the political agenda has been remapped through the last 35 years of employer's offensive. This is not simply a failure of specific organizations, but the result of a broad erosion of the infrastructure of dissent, the array of networks and organizations through which working class people develop and sustain capacities for effective resistance.

Collective capacities for critical analysis, communication, memory, and practical solidarity do not emerge automatically, nor are they produced simply by conscious anti-capitalist organizations. Rather, working class people

develop these capacities through informal networks in workplaces, communities, and schools; through cultural institutions, shared leisure activities, and educational programmes; and through more formal organizations such as political currents and union oppositions.

Anti-capitalist political organizing plays an important role in the development of the infrastructure of dissent. Specifically, anti-capitalist organizing provides the means to develop a strategic vision and activist agenda that reflects the divergent viewpoints and perspectives of activists in different social locations who share a common political commitment.

However, political organizing does not by itself create an infrastructure of dissent. The infrastructure of dissent is grounded in particular conditions of life and work. The restructuring of work, reorganization of everyday life in communities, and the reorientation of politics undercut existing forms of infrastructure and create the potential for new forms. Many of the communities and workplaces that generated remarkable resistance capacities in Europe and North America over much of the 20th century have been eliminated, transformed, or relocated. A new left is needed that will be oriented around the emerging resistance capacities of the working class as it is now.

A new left

Developing a new left requires a process of queering. For an individual, "coming out" involves a re-envisioning through engaging with a new political community. We are raised to be straight, but begin to recognize we are something else. Over time, this means developing capacities to see the world in new ways. Rather than seeing ourselves as a flawed version of the straight person we thought we were supposed to be, we begin to see and live new possibilities. As our vision is queered, we actually see more, as the oppressive character of heterosexual dominance is relatively invisible to those who participate in it and take it for granted.

Socialist-feminist perspectives on standpoint remind us that our view of the world depends in part on where we stand in it. This does not mean reducing politics to a set of fragmented and mutually incomprehensible identities, but rather understanding that those who experience oppression and exploitation see those relations from below with special clarity. Anti-capitalist organizations rightly aspire to a big picture view of the overall terrain of struggle, but this does not come through a single all-seeing perspective. Recognizing the limits and partiality of the politics we have developed does not mean simply tossing them out, but recognizing that like all human knowledge they are products of particular times and places.

The development of anti-capitalist politics has necessarily involved generalizing from specific experiences of sections of the working class under particular conditions. This can lead to a situation in which radicals mistake the experience of sections of the working class in specific circumstances for that of the class as a whole over time. When this happens, the politics are even more likely to unknowingly be shaped by the dominant power relations of imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, and heterosexism as well as hierarchies of pay and status among happens. For example, this has often happened simply as the result of generalizing from the experiences of a disproportionately white male unionized workforce in the Global North in particular moments.

Part of getting a broader view, then, is liberating our analytical tools, learning through engagement with queer, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist perspectives. Queering also means developing deliberate strategies to counter the dominant power relations as they get echoed within our organizations. If we don't work consciously against the dominant power relations within our organizations, they are all the more likely to re-emerge, since activists are people within this society.. This can include a wide range of oppressive practices, up to and including sexual assault and abuse. In his memoir *When Skateboards Will Be Free*, Said Saryafiezadeh reflects on what it was

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to be raised in the household of members of the Socialist Workers Party in the US. Among other things, he discusses his abuse at the hands of a trusted comrade who was left to babysit.

The complex relations of comradeship can often nurture sexism, racism, heterosexism, transphobia, and settler colonial perspectives if organizations don't work deliberately against reproducing them. Comradeship is a crucial dimension of anti-capitalist organizing, marked by shared experiences, passions, dreams, trust, and pain. It can be an incubator for beautiful and supportive human relationships that sustain us through the struggle, but also for relations of assault and abuse that reflect dominant power structures. It requires work to keep different forms of oppression from distorting relations of comradeship, as people will draw upon the ways of behaving and attitudes they developed in their everyday lives in capitalist society.

Queering is not a one-time action, but an ongoing process of learning from the world and challenging what we thought we knew. It does not mean simply rejecting the experience anti-capitalists have amassed over the past 150 years as it is crystallized in theory. Nor does it mean confining ourselves within the limits of historical frames without acknowledging their limitations. Queering offers the joy of discovery as well as the challenge of recognizing we still have a lot to learn.

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