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Reviews

Towards a Gay Communism

- Reviews section -

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Mario Mieli's book, written in the late 70s, reveals a world lost to us now – the radicalisation of the late 60s and early 70s, which provided the context for what was then called the gay liberation movement. Huge mobilisations arose against the war in Vietnam, while black people in the US rose in rebellion in cities across America after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968 – rebellions which inspired the Stonewall riot, the founding event of the gay liberation movement, the following year. In Britain, a national miners' strike brought down the Tory government in 1974. Many on the far left believed that capitalism was in its death agonies and that revolution was on the agenda of the day.

Alongside left activists and writers in the 1960s there existed a wide range of different activities characterised by a broader sense of the political, purely individual hedonism, or something in between. People experimented with communal living, sometimes including a rejection of monogamy. They took drugs – which the vast majority of people outside the 'counter-culture' back then didn't – and listened to new kinds of music. Those associated with 'anti-psychiatry', such as R.D. Laing and David Cooper, rejected mainstream psychiatry as a repressive tool for reinforcing social norms, and identified conditions like schizophrenia as a way of perceiving alternative realities. The development of oral contraceptives – 'the pill' – was part of the 'permissive society', the decline of the view that sex should only happen within marriage.

The gay liberation movement arose in the context formed by all these currents, and itself contained various different political strands. Some activists sought to develop links to the wider left, such as the Panthers or the working class. More moderate voices called for civil rights, and self-help groups and phone lines were established. The commercial scene of pubs and clubs expanded. For some of the most radical gay liberation activists, the main question then was not to devise strategies to change a world already in transformation, but to begin living now in a new way. In the new society, gender and sexuality would be utterly transformed. Gay liberation was not about demanding equality with straight people. As one London newsletter put it, referring to the right-wing US president and the Tory British prime minister, "We don't want to be normal people – Nixon and Heath are normal people." Gay people were not a fixed and defined minority – gay liberation was about the ending of all existing notions of gender and sexuality, a process in which those who defined as gay now were leading the way. Only a few years before, homosexuality had been seen as an embarrassing personal problem. Now gay people – or at least the fairly small numbers involved in gay liberation – believed that they were making an exhilarating new world.

All this provides the context for Mario Mieli's book, originally published in Italian under the title *Elements of a Homosexual Critique*. It's a utopian vision in which desires for respectability or carefully thought-out campaigns for reform have no place at all. The goal, instead, is a universal human emancipation in which everyone will be, in Mieli's sense of the term, 'transsexual' – rejecting all identities based on their gender or desires. Mieli is wild, defiant, makes puns, cheerfully rejects any notion of normality, celebrates anal pleasure. Masculinity is toxic, an obstacle to revolution. The kind of commercialised homosexuality that can be integrated into capitalism won't bring us liberation. Heterosexuality represents a restriction on human potential, a pathology. Education – or in Mieli's coinage, 'educastration' – is about trying to create stunted beings who can live in our restrictive society. All this can and will change, announces Mieli, like some prophet of the approaching apocalypse:

"We've all been defeated, therefore, in Warsaw. And each of us has their own Kronstadt. But the May that grows within us obliges us now, with gay clarity, to wage real war against capital and no one else. Eros to you and to us, captivating sisters and attractive brothers of the universal incest that is announced and impending!"

It's striking that here political events (the Russian revolution's failed attempt to capture Warsaw and its attack on the

fortress at Kronstadt, both of them problematic parts of its record) become metaphors for personal struggles. This is mostly not a book about collective political activity or strategy in the usual sense – indeed, Mieli is hostile to political parties, including those of the left (homosexuals have “overcome politics”). He is more interested in personal liberation, and if he draws on both Marx and Freud in his account of this, Freud is much more important for him.

Mieli makes much use, in particular, of Freud’s concept of ‘polymorphous perversity’. The newborn human infant, argues Freud, has a formless psyche, full of potential and able to take pleasure in different body parts and functions. As the infant develops and is socialised, they become a person who feels disgust at certain things, and whose pleasure in their own body is focussed particularly on the genitals, on sex. The liberation of Eros which Mieli prophesies is a matter of a return to polymorphous perversity – “Communism is the rediscovery of bodies and their fundamental communicative function, their polymorphous potential for love.”

Here Mieli echoes to some extent the book *Eros and Civilization*, by Herbert Marcuse, greatly influential in the 60s. Marcuse hoped for a society in which sensual and erotic feelings, rather than being mostly limited to sex, would form part of general social interaction. Mieli however tends to favour the liberation of sex as currently defined rather than encourage the development of a more diffuse eroticism. Indeed, sexual pleasure holds the key to ending capitalism. Mieli draws again on Freud, who argued that young children go through a series in developmental stages, each of them characterised by pleasure from a particular part of the body. First, as the infant sucks at the breast, comes the oral stage, which is followed, as they learn to control defecation, by the anal stage. Many people get to some extent stuck (‘fixated’) at one of these stages, claims Freud, instead of moving completely past them on the journey to what he saw as healthy, adult normality, where genital pleasure is dominant. People fixated at the anal stage exhibit behaviours suggestive of the pleasure of a full bowel – such as misers, since symbolic parallels exist between money and excrement – and which demonstrate an excessive desire for control, such as a concern for tidiness.

Mieli takes this line of argument a step further. Society’s high valuation of money and order depends on the suppression of desire – “the entire economic structure of society... depends on the sublimation of Eros.” This is true in particular of anal pleasure, and so the “(re)conquest of anality contributes to subverting the system in its foundations.” And so, gay men can bring about the revolution by seducing straight men and getting them to take pleasure in being penetrated anally. However much pleasure there is to be had from such a strategy – it certainly sounds more fun than selling papers – there’s no reason to think it will work. What’s more, this is an account of sexual liberation which has next to nothing to say about women, including lesbians. Nor is this the only problem with Mieli’s account of things.

For example, if we’re to somehow rediscover our polymorphous perversity consent is going to be a problem. The infant at the earliest stages of its development doesn’t use language – indeed, it hasn’t learned that other people exist and that it doesn’t control the universe. That discovery awaits it in the oral stage, when it finds out that the mother’s breast can be taken away, and thus that its mother is a separate person. Since society involves collaboration between people, it’s very hard to see how it can be made up of the polymorphously perverse, who are solipsistic beings without language. More specifically, when it comes to sex, such a being would not understand at all the need for consent.

And Mieli does, indeed, have a problem with consent. Since all people are at base polymorphously perverse, “homosexual desire is universal”. What do we make then of straight men who say they don’t want sex with other men? “We don’t want to do that’, they say, ‘it’s useless to insist, because we just don’t want to.’” These assertions, Mieli insists, are dishonest – as revealed by the fact that no straight man can withstand “skilled seduction by a gay person”. This figure of the ‘skilled seducer’ is way too close to the more recent ‘pick up artist’, both with their claims of manipulative techniques which can get anyone into bed, for it to seem liberating. The fact that Mieli doesn’t give much importance to consent is also shown by the fact that children are assumed to want to join the universal orgy and have sex with adults. No one is allowed to say no, or judged to be incapable of saying yes.

The second problem we face with the polymorphous infant as a model is that this account accepts sexuality as a natural, pre-given thing on a basically biological model. Mieli gives an account of the infant's erotic feelings being moulded by social pressures as it moves through the different stages of psychological development. His goal is to get back to some original state of affairs, when sex was natural and good. This has a good deal in common with other accounts of sex from the 1960s, which assumed that sexuality had been imprisoned and distorted by restrictive, 'Victorian' values. It was possible, in this view, to cast off the restrictive shell of bourgeois civilisation and find, again, the wholesome sexuality with which we were born.

But this conception of 'nature' is itself a development which happens in the context of capitalism. It emerged as urbanisation and industrialisation transformed parts of Europe and North America – anything outside of their grim remit was now part of 'nature', an unspoilt, integrated and semi-spiritual realm. Human beings living outside of industrial society, especially in Africa and the Pacific, were said to be 'close to nature' – and so in touch with some natural and benign sexuality. This is all implicitly racist, and the idea that we can go 'back to nature' in any case a fantasy. It might be fun to go camping for a week in the summer, but no one wants to live like that all the time, or abandon surgery or clocks.

Nor is there any natural and liberated sexuality, outside of culture and language – be it in our individual or collective pasts – to which we can return. Sexuality has changed all through history, just as human society has changed. For all the bits of Mieli – the anal sex, the drag, the seducing straight guys – which are transgressive, his basic conception of sexuality as a primal force that needs to burst free from social constraints isn't really very subversive at all. So there's a great deal in this book to enjoy – but it mostly reflects the ideas of a thrilling period in the revolutionary past, rather than equipping us with ideas for the revolutionary future.

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