

The Marxist understanding of the roots of LGBTQ oppression – Liberation School

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Revolutionary struggle and LGBTQ liberation

Every ruling class in history declares that their order is the “natural” state of society. According to this sort of history—which is really a denial of history—the prevailing forms of oppression are described as inevitable or even morally justified. This is equally true of the oppression of LGBTQ people, which is a feature of capitalism that can be traced back to the very origins of class society.

In his famous work, *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Frederick Engels drew on existing anthropological evidence to show, that for the vast majority of human existence, people lived communally without any kind of social hierarchy. This has been confirmed and expanded on by many modern anthropologists, including Marxist feminist Evelyn Reed. For thousands of years, human beings struggled alongside one another for survival and the continuation of life in the face of scarcity and deprivation, without forming classes based upon wealth or power.

Engels explained that inequality in society emerged due to the development of tools and methods of production that allowed for the production of a surplus beyond what was needed for survival. This set the basis for one sector of society, primarily males, to be able to hoard and accumulate wealth as private property. Men were the primary hunters and organizers of animal husbandry, although women participated in these tasks as well. Before the advent of private property, there was no special power or privileges associated with this type of labor.

Previously, society had been organized along matrilineal lines: women, the organizers of food, shelter and child rearing, were the center of life in the living spaces of people everywhere. The lineage of any person was traced through the mother’s line.

Children were not the sole responsibility of the biological mother and/or father.

Rather, kinship ties linked children to the brothers and sisters of their mother and community.

Patriarchy and class society

As the accumulation of wealth continued and the possessing class continued to grow in number and power, “mother-right” was eventually overturned and replaced by patriarchal forms. This marked the beginning of the development of a society based on inequality, in which a minority came to control the

wealth and resources, using organized violence and force to maintain its new position in society.

The overthrow of mother-right and establishment of patriarchal forms resulted in women becoming, in essence, the property of men—a form of domestic slavery.

Female sexuality, once freely expressed, was now severely restricted, in order to assure the “legitimate” line of descent from father to son for the purposes of inheritance. Marriage customs were developed to manage the new property relationships.

Over the course of many centuries, a new patriarchal ideology in support of the new class-based societies and institutions took the place of the old, matrilineal religions that dominated the early period of communal society.

With the rise and expansion of class society and development into feudalism, the severity of the oppression of women, homosexuals and gender non-conforming people intensified. Under feudalism, people caught or accused of having sexual relations with someone of the same sex or violating the enforced rules of gender expression were brutally persecuted, tortured and put to death, often by being burned alive.

People were required to dress according to strict codes differentiating men and women. The wearing of the “wrong” forms of clothing was not allowed and those daring to do so were hounded and persecuted.

To survive repression and social isolation, they had to “pass” and hide their true selves. More than clothing alone, even body language or appearance could result in condemnation from the state or by organized religion.

Entering the capitalist era

In the aftermath of the bourgeois democratic revolution in France, when the egalitarian spirit was at its high point, homosexuality was decriminalized. But in general, the capitalist ruling classes retained and strengthened anti-LGBTQ laws as they became dominant in Europe, the United States and other parts of the world through colonialism.

The first major expressions of a gay rights movement within capitalism took place in the late 1800s. A radical “free love” intellectual movement, making use of early feminist and anti-capitalist theories, challenged the repressive family and gender norms of the Victorian era. In Germany, at the turn of the twentieth century, groups defending homosexuality were formed around writer and doctor Magnus Hirschfeld.

A major breakthrough of the era came with the 1917 Russian Revolution, which de-criminalized homosexuality while granting divorce on demand, extending equal rights for women and legalizing abortion. In 1933, the Soviet government reintroduced laws against homosexuality, falsely describing

it as a bourgeois decadence of the previous ruling class.

Resistance to the status quo

In the United States, the 1950s was a period of extreme repression. Along with the most vicious anti-communist witchhunts came anti-gay witch-hunts and a period of required “conformity,” which was characterized by the promotion and enforcement of rigid models of behavior and relationships. Nonetheless, this was the period of the first sustained U.S. gay rights organizations.

In the 1960s a worldwide upsurge against the status quo developed, with revolutionary movements against colonialism and imperialism, and rebellions from youth and oppressed communities—often gravitating towards socialism. This period of revolutionary struggle included the stirrings of gay, lesbian and transgender communities against centuries of persecution and oppression.

The political movement of the period intersected with a radical youth culture that challenged many gender norms. Even such things as men wearing sandals, beads or pink clothes, or having long hair, earned the wrath of the establishment. Women who wore trousers, suits or ties likewise were attacked in various ways.

The strict norms of behavior were enforced all across society by the various agencies of repression and propaganda of the bourgeoisie.

It is an unfortunate footnote to history that during the peak of anti-communist and anti-gay propaganda most left groups and civil rights organizations, with a few exceptions, failed to stand up to the gaybaiting.

That was to change with the emergence of the modern LGBTQ movement following the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969.

Leading up to the Stonewall period

The Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 in New York City marked a historical moment in the struggle for equality. After centuries of persecution and being forced into the dark shadows of society, people began pouring out of isolation to fight back against homophobia, gay- and trans-bashing, police brutality and discrimination, forging a mass struggle in the streets.

It is important to note the exceptional revolutionary contributions of transgender people in the early days of the Stonewall period.

Barely remembered, but greatly important, transgender people rebelled in the streets of San Francisco in 1965 in what is now known as the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot. The militant rebellion, mainly of transgender people from the Tenderloin district in San Francisco, was one landmark moment that preceded Stonewall.

Significantly, activists from the established San Francisco lesbian and gay movement of the time came out the next day to demonstrate in a large display of solidarity with the transgender community.

At the time of Stonewall, many organizations were formed, including those for transgender liberation. The best known, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), was founded by two outstanding transgender women, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, who are now recognized as some of the great leaders of the early LGBTQ movement. Rivera described the organization, saying “STAR was for the street gay people, the street homeless people, and anybody that needed help at that time.” The group later re-emerged for a short period of time, and changed the “T” in “STAR” to stand for Transgender, reflecting developments in language and politics.

Fighting racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia

Although this struggle was and is heroic, anti-LGBTQ bigotry and many other evils of capitalism continue with all their brutality. At a time when the wealthy capitalist elites are attacking the standards of living of all workers, unity and determined struggle are key to the period ahead.

The mass incarceration of Black and Latino people, police killings of youth, incidents of gay- and trans-bashing and attacks on immigrants are part of the everyday experiences of our class. Along with these attacks is a well-funded campaign to overturn the gains of the women’s movement.

Capitalism, with its preservation of sexist norms in both the economic base of society and throughout the culture, is an obstacle to true liberation. Today, the struggle for socialism includes building a strong movement for democratic rights that unites working-class and oppressed people. That is why a Marxist analysis of the history of LGBTQ oppression and the development of the LGBTQ movement for equality is an important part of the theoretical roadmap for revolutionary struggle.