

## ARTICLES.

## ■ HOMOSEXUAL LIBERATION

A Socialism  
Of the Skin

TONY KUSHNER

Is there a relationship between homosexual liberation and socialism? That's an unfashionably utopian question, but I pose it because it's entirely conceivable that we will one day live miserably in a thoroughly ravaged world in which lesbians and gay men can marry and serve openly in the Army and that's it. Capitalism, after all, can absorb a lot. Poverty, war, alienation, environmental destruction, colonialism, unequal development, boom/bust cycles, private property, individualism, commodity fetishism, the fetishization of the body, the fetishization of violence, guns, drugs, child abuse, underfunded and bad education (itself a form of child abuse)—these things are key to the successful functioning of the free market. Homophobia is not; the system could certainly accommodate demands for equal rights for homosexuals without danger to itself.

But are officially sanctioned homosexual marriages and identifiably homosexual soldiers the ultimate aims of homosexual liberation? Clearly not, if by homosexual liberation we mean the liberation of homosexuals, who, like most everyone else, are and will continue to be oppressed by the depredations of capital until some better way of living together can be arrived at. So then are homosexual marriages and soldiery the ultimate, which is to say the only achievable, aims of the *gay rights movement*, a politics not of vision but of pragmatics?

Andrew Sullivan, in a provocative, carefully reasoned, moving, troubling article in *The New Republic* a year ago, arrived at that conclusion. I used to have a crush on Andrew, neo-con or neoliberal (or whatever the hell they're called these days) though he be. I would never have married him, but he's cute! Then he called me a "West Village Neil Simon," *in print*, and I retired the crush. This by way of background for what follows, to prove that I am, despite my wounded affections, capable of the "reason and restraint" he calls for at the opening of his article, "The Politics of Homosexuality."

Andrew divides said politics into four, you should pardon the expression, camps—conservative, radical, moderate and liberal—each of which lacks a workable "solution to the problem of gay-straight relations." Conservatives (by which he means reactionaries, I think, but he is very polite) and radicals both profess an absolutist politics of "impossibilism," which alienates them from "the mainstream." Moderates (by which he means conservatives) practice an ostrich-politics of denial, increasingly superseded by the growing visibility of gay men and lesbians. And liberals (moderates) err mainly in try-

ing to legislate, through antidiscrimination bills, against reactive, private-sector bigotry.

Andrew's prescription is that liberals (with whom he presumably identifies most closely) go after "pro-active" government bans on homosexual participation in the military and the institution of marriage. Period. "All public (as opposed to private) discrimination against homosexuals [should] be ended and . . . every right and responsibility that heterosexuals enjoy by virtue of the state [should] be extended to those who grow up different. And that is all." Andrew's new "liberal" gay politics "does not legislate private tolerance, it declares public equality. . . . Our battle is not for political victory but for personal integrity."

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*To have openly queer G.I.s, and same-sex confectionary couples on wedding cakes, won't be enough.*

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The article is actually a kind of manifesto for gay conservatism, and as such it deserves scrutiny. Every manifesto also deserves acolytes, and "The Politics of Homosexuality" has earned at least one: Bruce Bawer, who appeared this year in *The New Republic* with "The Stonewall Myth: Can the Gay Rights Movement Get Beyond the Politics of Nostalgia?" Bruce, however, is no Andrew. He's cute enough; he looks rueful and contemplative on the cover of his book, *A Place at the Table*, though if you've read it you'll know Bruce doesn't like it when gay men get dishy and bitchy and talk sissy about boys. He thinks it makes us look bad for the straights. Bruce is *serious*, more serious even than Andrew, as the big open book in the cover photo proclaims: He's read more than half of it! (Lest anyone think I habitually read *The New Republic*, the playwright David Greenspan gave me Andrew's article, and Andrew Kopkind among others drew my attention to Bruce's.)

Bruce is not only more serious than Andrew, he's more polite, no easy trick; he's so polite I almost hate to write that he's also much easier to dismiss, but he is. His article is short and sloppy, and he has this habit of creating paper tigers. Take the eponymous "Stonewall Myth," to which "many gay men and lesbians routinely" subscribe: According to Bruce, these "many" believe that gay history started with Stonewall and regard the riot as "a sacred event that lies beyond the reach of objective discourse." Huh? I don't know anyone who believes that, and I've never encountered such a ridiculous statement in any work of gay criticism or reportage or even fiction. But Bruce goes on for pages tilting at this windmill and the "politics of nostalgia" that accompanies it. He's also, and I mean this politely, a little slow. It took him five years to figure out that maybe a gay man shouldn't be writing movie reviews for the viciously homophobic *American Spectator*. In his book he is anguished: "Had I been wrong to write for so reactionary a publication? If so, then how did one figure out where

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*Tony Kushner is a playwright. His most recent work is Angels in America.*

to draw the line? Should I refuse to write for the *Nation* because its editors frequently appeared to be apologists for Communism," etc.

In the article Bruce decides that our real problem is a fear of acceptance, fear of failure, a "deep unarticulated fear of that metaphorical place at the table," and so we march in front of TV cameras in our underwear, confirming for all the world that we really are sick. (Clothes, worn and discarded, are always bothering Bruce; spandex and leather, business suits and bras, his writing is littered with the stuff.) I'll focus mostly on Andrew's meatier, seminal (oops!) text. (For a polite but mostly thorough reaming of *A Place at the Table*, read David Bergman in the Spring '94 issue of *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*.)

In "The Politics of Homosexuality," Andrew concedes quite a lot of good will to those farthest to the right. He draws an odd distinction between the "visceral recoil" of bigots and the more cautious discomfort of homophobes—those who "sincerely believe" in "discouragement of homosexuality," who couch their sincere beliefs in "Thomist argument," in "the natural law tradition, which, for all its failings is a resilient pillar of Western thought." Bigotry, too, is a resilient pillar of Western thought, or it was the last time I checked. Andrew realizes bigotry "expresses itself in thuggery and name-calling. But there are some [conservatives] who don't support anti-gay violence." Like who? George Will, Bill Buckley and Cardinal O'Connor have all made token clucking noises about fag-bashing, but the incommensurability of these faint protests with the frightening extent of the violence, which has certainly been encouraged by the very vocal homophobia of "conservatives," might force one to question the sincerity of their admonitions, and further, to question the value of distinguishing "Thomist" homophobes from the "thugs" who in 1993 attacked or killed more than 1,900 lesbians and gay men (at least those are the hate crimes we know about).

Andrew takes a placid view of people on the reactionary right because he is convinced their days are numbered. But does he really believe that Pat Buchanan is now "reduced to joke-telling"? Such a conclusion is possible only if one ignores the impressive, even terrifying, political energies of the religious right. Since Andrew decides political discourse can countenance only "reason and restraint," he of course must exclude the Bible-thumpers, who are crazy and *loud*. But the spectrum is more crowded, and on the right less well-behaved, than a gentleman like Andrew cares to admit. His is an endearing reticence, but it is not wise.

Andrew is at his best describing the sorts of traumas homophobia inflicts on its victims (though to nobody's surprise he doesn't care for the word "victim"), yet despite his sensitivity, he's alarmingly quick to give up on the antidiscrimination legislation of those he calls liberals. "However effective or comprehensive anti-discrimination laws are, they cannot reach far enough." They can't give us confidence, and they only "scratch the privileged surface." "As with other civil rights legislation, those least in need of it may take fullest advantage: the most litigious and articulate homosexuals, who would likely brave the harsh winds of homophobia in any case."

It's unclear whether Andrew opposes such legislation, which, it seems to me, is worthwhile even if only moderately effective. I assume that in limiting the gay rights movement's ambitions to fighting "pro-active" discrimination, he is arguing against trying to pass laws that impede "reactive" discrimination, though I can't find anything in his very specific article that states this definitively. (In any case, his distinction between "reactive" and "pro-active" discrimination falls apart as soon as one considers adoption laws or education or sexual harassment.) Perhaps he's vague because he knows he hasn't much of a case. What worries him especially is that the right will make effective propaganda out of the argument that "civil rights laws essentially dictate the behavior of heterosexuals, in curtailing their ability to discriminate." And he believes further that this argument contains "a germ of truth."

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### *The idea that invisibility exempts anyone from discrimination is perverse.*

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The argument is unquestionably good propaganda for homophobes, but it's identical to the N.R.A.'s argument for giving every nutbag in the country access to a semi-automatic. We have to argue such propaganda down, not run away from the legislation that inspired it. As for the "germ of truth," Andrew writes:

Before most homosexuals have even come out of the closet they are demanding concessions from the majority, including a clear curtailment of economic and social liberties, in order to ensure protections few of them will even avail themselves of. It is no wonder there is opposition.

This is a peculiar view of the processes by which enfranchisement is extended: Civil rights, apparently, are not rights at all, not something inalienable, to which one is entitled by virtue of being human or a citizen, but concessions the majority makes to a minority if and only if the minority can promise it will use those rights. Antidiscrimination laws are seen as irrelevant to creating a safer environment in which closeted or otherwise oppressed people might feel more free to exercise their equality; laws apparently cannot encourage freedom, only punish transgressions against it.

The argument that antidiscrimination laws violate "majority" freedoms has already been used to eliminate the basis of most of the legislation from the civil rights movement. Affirmative action, housing and employment laws, and voter redistricting can all be said to curtail the freedom of bigots to discriminate, which is, of course, what such measures are supposed to do. The connection that such legislation implies between gay rights and other minority rights displeases Andrew, who resists the idea that, as forms of oppression, homophobia and racism have much in common.

With homosexuality, according to Andrew, "the option of self-concealment has always existed," something that cannot be said about race. (I could introduce him to some flaming

creatures who might make him question that assessment, but never mind.) "Gay people are not uniformly discriminated against; openly gay people are." Certainly there are important differences of kind and degree and consequence between racism and homophobia, but the idea that invisibility exempts anyone from discrimination is perverse. To need to be invisible, or to feel that you need to be, is to be discriminated against. The fact that homophobia differs significantly from racism—and, loath as I am to enter the discrimination olympics, I'd argue that the consequences of racism in America today are worse than those of homophobia—does not mean that people engaged in one struggle can't learn from another, or that the tools one oppressed people have developed can't be used to try to liberate others.

Andrew is joined by Bruce in his anxiety to preserve the differences among various kinds of oppression, but they both seem less interested in according each group its own "integrity," as Andrew rightly calls it, than in keeping gay rights from being shanghaied by the radical left. "The standard post-Stonewall practice . . . indiscriminately link[s] the movement for gay equal rights with any left-wing cause to which any gay leader might happen to have a personal allegiance . . ." (this is Bruce). "Such linkages have been a disaster for the gay rights movement: not only do they falsely imply that most gay people sympathize with those so-called progressive movements, but they also serve to reinforce the idea of homosexuality itself as a 'progressive' phenomenon, as something essentially political in nature." Andrew, meanwhile, warns against the "universalist temptation," which exercises "an enervating and dissipating effect on gay radicalism's political punch."

Gay radicalism's political punch is not something either Andrew or Bruce wishes to see strengthened. Conservative gay politics is in a sense the politics of containment: Connections

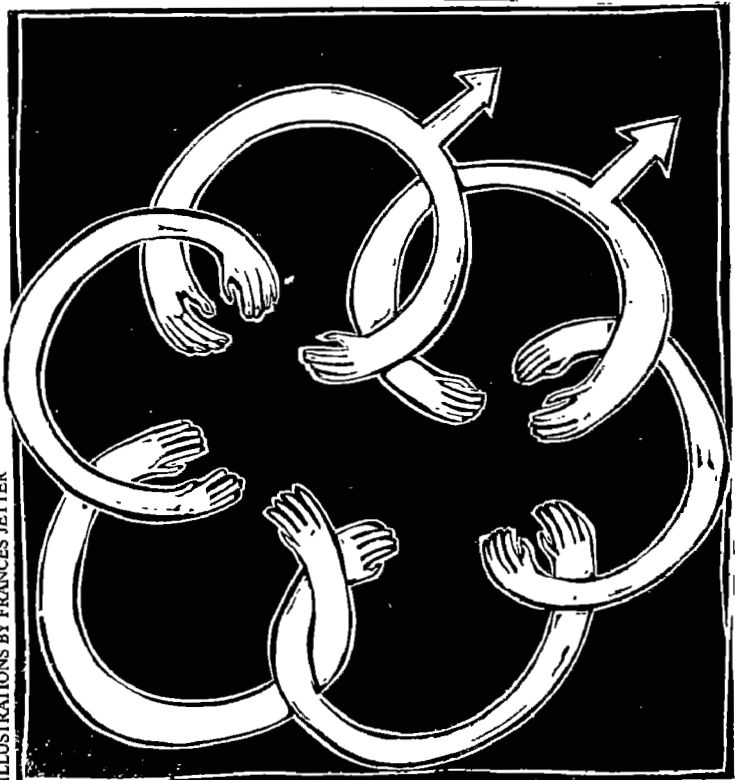
made with a broadly defined left are what must be contained. The pair predicts the emergence of increasing numbers of conservative homosexuals (presumably white—in both Andrew's and Bruce's prophecies they come from the suburbs), who are unsympathetic to the idea of linking their fortunes with any other political cause. The future depends not on collectivity and solidarity but on homosexual individualism—on lesbians and gay men instructing the straight world quietly, "person by person, life by life, heart by heart" (Andrew), to "do the hard, painstaking work of *getting* straight Americans used to it" (Bruce).

Like all assimilationists, Andrew and Bruce are unwilling to admit that structural or even particularly formidable barriers exist between themselves and their straight oppressors. And for all their elaborate fears that misbehaving queers alienate instead of communicate, nowhere do they express a concern that people of color or the working class or the poor are not being communed with. The audience we are ostensibly losing is identified exclusively as phobic straights, "families" (which one suspects are two-parent, middle-class) and gay teenagers.

Bruce and Andrew are very concerned about young gay people. Watching a "lean and handsome" 15-year-old leaf through *The Native* at the start of his book, Bruce worries that queer radicalism, sexual explicitness and kink frighten gay kids and the families from whence they come. Probably it is the case that teenagers are freaked by photo ads for *The Dungeon*. But *The Native* is not produced for teenagers. Images of adult lesbian and gay desire can't be tailored to appeal to 15-year-olds and their straight parents. Our culture is the manifest content of our lives, not a carefully constructed recruiting brochure. True, there aren't readily available, widely circulated images of homosexual domesticity or accomplishment or happiness, but I'm more inclined to blame the homophobic media than gay radicalism for that. Nor does the need for such images mandate the abandonment of public declarations of the variety of sexual desire, the public denial and repression of which is after all *The Problem*. Lesbian and gay kids will have less trouble accepting their homosexuality not when the Gay Pride Parade is an orderly procession of suits arranged in monogamous pairs but when people learn to be less horrified by sex and its complexities.

Out of the great stew of class, race, gender and sexual politics that inspires the contentious, multiplying, endlessly unfixed lesbian and gay community in America, gay conservatism manages to make a neat division between a majority that is virtually indistinguishable in behavior and aspirations and *Weltanschauung* from the straight world, and a minority of deviants and malcontents who are fucking things up for everyone, thwarting the only realizable goal, which is normalcy.

Andrew says up front that politics is supposed to relieve anxiety. I'd say that it's supposed to relieve misery and injustice. When all that can be expected from politics, in the way of immediate or even proximate social transformation, are gay weddings and gay platoons, the vast rest of it all, every other agony inflicted by homophobia, will have to be taken care of by some osmotic process of quiet individualized per-



suasion, which will take many, many, many years. It's the no-government, antipolitics approach to social change. You can hear it argued now against school desegregation, or any attempt to guarantee equal education; you can hear it argued against welfare or jobs programs. It's the legacy of trickle-down, according to which society should change slowly, organically, spontaneously, without interference, an approach that requires not so much the "discipline, commitment, responsibility" that Bruce exhorts us to—we already practice those—but a great, appalling luxury of time (which maybe the editor of *The New Republic* and the erstwhile movie critic of *The American Spectator* can afford), after the passage of which many, many, many more miserable lives will have been spent or dispensed with. I am always suspicious of the glacier-paced patience of the right.

Such a politics of homosexuality is dispiriting. Like conservative thought in general, it offers very little in the way of hope, and very little in the way of vision. I expect both hope and vision from my politics. Andrew and Bruce offer nothing more than that gay culture will dissolve invisibly into straight culture, all important differences elided.

I think both Andrew and Bruce would call this assessment unfair, though I don't mean it to be. Andrew's politics may be roomier than Bruce's; Andrew is more worldly and generous (except, apparently, when it comes to the theater). Both men have a vision. They see before them an attainable peaceable kingdom, in which gay men and lesbians live free of fear (of homophobia, at least), in which gay kids aren't made to feel worthless, or worse, because they're gay.

But what of all the other things gay men and lesbians have to fear? What of the things gay children have to fear, in common with all children? What of the planetary despoilment that kills us? Or the financial necessity that drives some of us into unsafe, insecure, stupid, demeaning and ill-paying jobs? Or the unemployment that impoverishes some of us? Or the racism some of us face? Or the rape some of us fear? What about AIDS? Is it enough to say, Not our problem? Of course gay and lesbian politics is a progressive politics: It depends on progress for the accomplishment of any of its goals. Is there any progressive politics that recognizes no connect-edness, no border-crossings, no solidarity or possibility for mutual aid?

"A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing." This is neither Bruce nor Andrew, but that most glorious and silly gay writer, Oscar Wilde. Because this is the twenty-fifth anniversary of Stonewall, that mythic moment that lies beyond all objective discourse (just kidding, Bruce!), we are all thinking big. That's what anniversaries are for, to invite consideration of the past and contemplation of the future. And so, to lift my sights and spirits after the dour, pinched antipolitics of gay conservatism, I revisited Oscar, a lavish thinker, as he appears in political drag in his magnificent essay, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism."

Oscar, like our two boys, was an individualist, though rather more individual in the way he lived, and much less eager to conform. It would be stretching things to say Oscar was a rad-

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ical, exactly, though if Bruce and Andrew had been his contemporaries, Lord knows how they would have tut-tutted at his scandalous carryings-on.

Oscar's socialism is an exaltation of the individual, of the individual's immense capacities for beauty and for pleasure. Behind Oscar's socialist politics, wrote John Cowper Powys, is "a grave Mirandola-like desire to reconcile the woods of Arcady with the Mount of Transfiguration." What could be swoonier? Or, with all due deference to Andrew and Bruce's sober, rational politics of homosexuality, what could be more gay?

Powys wrote that Oscar's complaint against capitalism and industrialism is "the irritation of an extremely sensitive skin . . . combined with a pleasure-lover's annoyance at seeing other people so miserably wretched." If there is a relationship between socialism and homosexual liberation, perhaps this is it: an irritation of the skin.

"One's regret," Oscar tells us, "is that society should be constructed on such a basis that man has been forced into a groove in which he cannot freely develop what is wonderful, and fascinating, and delightful in him—in which, in fact, he misses the true pleasure and joy of living." Socialism, as an alternative to individualism politically and capitalism economically, must surely have as its ultimate objective the restitution of the joy of living we may have lost when we first picked up a tool. Toward what other objective is it worthy to strive?

Perhaps the far horizon of lesbian and gay politics is a socialism of the skin. Our task is to confront the political problematics of desire and repression. As much as Bruce and Andrew want to distance themselves from the fact, Stonewall was a sixties thing, part of the utopian project of that time (and the sixties, Joan Nestle writes, is "the favorite target of people who take delight in the failure of dreams"). Honoring the true desire of the skin, and the connection between the skin and heart and mind and soul, is what homosexual liberation is about.

Gay rights may be obtainable, on however broad or limited a basis, but liberation depends on a politics that goes beyond, not an antipolitics. Our unhappiness as scared queer children doesn't only isolate us, it also politicizes us. It inculcates in us a desire for connection that is all the stronger because we have experienced its absence. Our suffering teaches us solidarity; or it should. □

## ■ AIDS IN OUR TIME—I

# After the Band Stopped Playing

DAVID L. KIRP

**L**ike no other disease of modern times, AIDS is at once an epidemic and an accusation. "I am getting sicker. Time is running out": This is how reporter and AIDS patient Jeffrey Schmalz began his impassioned essay on AIDS in *The New York Times Magazine* last November, a piece that became famous when, by a rude twist of fate, it also became his obituary. "Once AIDS was a hot topic," he wrote. But now "the world is moving on, uncaring, frustrated and bored, leaving by the roadside those of us who are infected and who can't help but wonder: Whatever happened to AIDS?"

Whatever happened to AIDS, indeed! In March 1992 at a New York City political fundraiser, that same question was posed to Bill Clinton by a public relations executive named Robert Rafsky, who after being diagnosed with AIDS a few years earlier had become a full-time ACT UP activist. "What are you going to do about AIDS?" Rafsky demanded. "We're dying!" The encounter was highlighted in Rafsky's obituary, which ran in the *Times* in February 1993; and this outraged question has been voiced with the regularity of a mantra in the numberless AIDS memorial services I have attended.

Interspersed among the reminiscences about dead friends familiar at such occasions there comes a cry rarely heard when the cause of death is, say, heart failure or a car crash: "When will this dying end? What are all of you—the politicians, the scientists, the Republic at large—going to do about AIDS?" Rage has been a way to fend off depression and despair—hence the power of the ACT UP motto Silence=Death. When Rafsky wrote an Op-Ed piece for the *Times*, the title, "A Better Life for Having Acted Up," was both a statement about the power of catharsis and a play on the name of the organization whose barricades he manned.

I have said these things myself many times, in a voice grown rough from grieving, and my own internal tuning fork is in sync with what Schmalz and Rafsky have written. Yet in a critical sense their lament is wrong. The AIDS problem of these times has very little to do with an uncaring world or a conspiracy of silence—on the contrary, AIDS continues to hold the attention of Americans even as other debilitating illnesses like Alzheimer's disease have faded from view. Americans have no patience, it is said, we are a nation of issue-surfers; yet thirteen years and counting into the epidemic, AIDS will not go away. It is a theme of our political culture and, more and more, our popular culture too: The AIDS movie *Philadelphia* was 1994's first box-office hit.

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