The Fracturing of LGBT Identities under Neoliberal Capitalism

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Abstract
Historians have linked the emergence of contemporary lesbian/gay identities to the development of capitalism. A materialist approach should also look at different forms of sexual identity, and their connections with specific phases of capitalist development. Marxist long-wave theory can help us understand how the decline of Fordism contributed to shifts in LGBT identities, speeding the consolidation of gay identity while fostering the rise of alternative sexual identities. These alternative identities, sometimes defined as ‘queer’, characterised by sexual practices that are still stigmatised, by explicit power-differentials and above all by gender-nonconformity, are particularly common among young and disadvantaged working-class strata. The growing diversity of identities is a challenge to any gay universalism that neglects class, gender, sexual, racial/ethnic and other differences, to the currently dominant forms of lesbian/gay organising, and ultimately to the prevailing division of human beings into gay and straight.1

Keywords
Fordism, LGBT, long waves, neoliberalism, queer, sexuality

Sexuality, once a largely unexplored continent for historical materialism, has long since ceased to be so. In the 1970s and early ’80s lesbian/gay historians, using Marxist and feminist analytical tools among others, began to chart the

1. Some initial thoughts for this article originated as a talk at the IIRE Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Strategy Seminar in Amsterdam in August 2000; many thanks to the 2000, 2002 and 2009 IIRE Seminar participants for their comments and ideas. Criticisms and observations by Nina Trige Anderson, Pascale Berthault, Terry Conway and Jamie Gough, and especially comments, suggestions and written exchanges with Alan Sears, were particularly helpful. Thanks as well to David Fernbach and to the editorial committee of Science & Society for comments on earlier versions, to Christopher Beck for his support and stimulating comments and questions, and to Historical Materialism board-members, especially Paul Reynolds, for their comments and suggestions. This article is dedicated to Torvald Patterson (1964–2005), in-your-face revolutionary queer, in loving memory.
emergence of contemporary lesbian/gay identities. Although historical-materialist categories have been supplemented and then to a large extent supplanted in the field by Foucauldian approaches since the 1980s and queer theory since the 1990s, elements contributed by the first, Marxist-influenced generation of historians and theorists still survive to some extent within a broad range of social-constructionist perspectives. Most historians and theorists – if not necessarily most lesbian and gay laypeople – agree that modern lesbian/gay identities are unique, clearly distinguishable from any of the same-sex sexualities that existed before the last century or so and from many that still exist in various parts of the world.

Whether they cite Marx, Foucault, or both, historians’ analysis of lesbian/gay identity has linked its emergence to the development of modern, industrialised, urbanised societies. Some historians have linked its emergence, in a more-or-less explicitly Marxist way, to the development of capitalism. This connection has continued to be made by writers working within a Marxist framework. Recently, Kevin Floyd has detected more broadly a ‘greater openness [in queer thought] to the kind of direct engagement with Marxism that emphasizes its explanatory power’.

Yet some theorists have seemed uneasy in recent years about the questions that were initially not asked in these accounts. Once this specific form of lesbian/gay identity has been explored and its emergence mapped, the question arises: is this the end of the story? Especially as more writings have charted the spread of LGBT communities in Asia and Africa, some have wondered whether all other forms of same-sex sexuality are surrendering to what Dennis Altman has critiqued as the triumphant ‘global gay’, a monolithic figure riding the wave of capitalist globalisation. In much the same way that homo sapiens was once naively viewed as the culmination of biological evolution, and liberal democracy (according to Francis Fukuyama) as the culmination of human history, one might have sometimes imagined that all roads of LGBT history

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2. For example, Fernbach 1981; D’Emilio 1983a and 1983b. A word on terminology: the term ‘lesbian/gay’ in this article refers to a historically specific phenomenon, defined in Section I below. ‘LGBT’ (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) is used as a broader term for people with same-sex sexualities or identities. Although the word ‘queer’ is sometimes used by others to refer generally to LGBT people, I try to reserve the word in this article to those who self-identify as queer, who are often rebelling, not only against the heterosexual norm, but also against the dominant forms of lesbian/gay identity. I sometimes use ‘gay’, ‘lesbian/gay’ or ‘LGB’ particularly to refer to more ‘respectable’ people who emphatically do not identify as queer.
3. See, for example, D’Emilio 1983a.
4. See, for example, Hennessy 2000; Sears 2005.
led to Castro Street in San Francisco. A few queer theorists have tried to undermine any such monolithic vision of gay identity, rejecting the one-dimensional focus on gender-orientation that underlies it. But, despite their abstract championing of ‘difference’, they have rarely engaged concretely with the historiography that sometimes seems to suggest that LGBT history is a one-way street. In Paul Reynolds’s words, they have ‘centred on the social production of categories discursively rather than determinantly through essential causality and power of the social relations of production’.

This article argues that there are socioeconomic forces that have been leading LGBT people to question lesbian/gay identity as it took shape by the 1970s. A historically-based, social constructionist, Marxist approach can examine historically different sexual identities under capitalism, without privileging any particular form of identity; can chart not only the emergence of lesbian/gay identities, but also shifts in sexual identities in recent decades, exploring connections between shifting identities and successive phases of capitalist development. One useful tool is the Marxist theory of capitalist long waves, and specifically Marxist analyses of the mode of capitalist accumulation that was on the upswing until the early 1970s and turned sharply downward with the recessions of 1974–5 and 1979–82. A historical-materialist analysis of this kind may provide a more solid theoretical basis for addressing a central political concern of recent queer theory – the defence of nonconformist or less privileged LGBT people against ‘homonormativity’ – than queer theory itself offers, while helping to lay the foundation for a queer anticapitalism.

It is by now nothing new to link the rise of what might be called classic lesbian/gay identity to the rise of a ‘free’ labour-force under capitalism. This has taken centuries, and historians have generally looked at it as a long process. But the breakthrough of gay identity as we know it on a mass-scale is in fact very recent, more a matter of decades than of centuries. On closer examination,

7. For example, Seidman 1997, p. 195.
9. This article uses the term ‘social constructionism’ simply as the opposite of ‘essentialism’ (a view of sexual identities as biologically determined or otherwise transhistorical), not to refer to a specific school of thought contrary to Marxism. Although Marxists such as Klara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai wrote insightfully about sexuality within a purely Marxist framework, more recent Marxist treatments of the subject have almost always engaged critically with other approaches, such as psychoanalysis, feminism, Foucauldianism, post-colonialism and queer theory. I believe that a rigorous Marxist approach to sexuality is not only compatible with an engagement with other social-constructionist approaches, but in fact requires it.
11. Lisa Duggan has defined ‘homonormativity’ as a set of norms that ‘does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them’ (Duggan 2002, p. 179).
the consolidation and spread of gay identity, especially among the mass of working-class people, took place to a large extent during what some Marxist economists refer to as the expansive long wave of 1945–73. Gay identity on a mass-scale, emerging gradually after a period of repression from the 1930s to the 1950s, was dependent on the growing prosperity of the working and middle-classes, catalysed by profound cultural changes from the 1940s to the 1970s (from the upheavals of the Second World War to the mass-radicalisation of the New Left years) that prosperity helped make possible. This means that gay identity was shaped in many ways by the mode of capitalist accumulation that some economists call ‘Fordism’: specifically by mass-consumer societies and welfare-states.

The decline of Fordism has also had implications for LGBT identities, communities and politics. The decades of slower economic growth that began with the 1974–5 recession had a differentiated impact on LGBT people and their communities. On the one hand, commercial gay scenes and sexual identities compatible with these scenes advanced and were consolidated in many parts of the world, particularly among middle-class layers. On the other hand, commercial scenes have not been equally determinant for the lifestyles or identities of all LGBT people. In the dependent world, many poor people simply have a hard time taking part in commercial gay scenes. In developed capitalist countries, while commercial scenes are more accessible to even lower-income LGBTs, growing economic inequality has meant increasingly divergent realities in LGBT people’s lives. Alienation has mounted among some LGBT people from the overconsumption increasingly characteristic of many aspects of the commercial gay scene, which inevitably marginalises many LGBT people. Alternative scenes of various sorts (not always necessarily less commercial) have proliferated.

There is of course no one-to-one correspondence between economic and social developments and shifts in sexual, cultural and political identities. In LGBT communities, as in the world at large, there is a whole set of institutions that produce (among other things) lesbian/gay ideology and identity, mediate the underlying class and social dynamics, and represent ‘the imaginary

12. See, for example, Chauncey 1994, pp. 334–46.
14. The concept of Fordism has been largely associated with the French ‘régulation’ school, the current of Marxist economics relied on by, for example, Floyd (Floyd 2009). Many of the basic elements of what regulationists call the Fordist mode of accumulation are also to be found in Mandelian long-wave theory or the ‘social structure of accumulation’-approach. These different schools differ with each other particularly about the causes of the rise and decline of different modes of accumulation. While important, these debates are not directly relevant to this article.
relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’. To analyse how all these institutions – from newspapers and magazines to porn-video producers to (divisions of) publishing houses to websites and chat-rooms to lesbian/gay-studies departments to small-business associations to sports clubs and beyond – functioned ideologically under Fordism, and tended to function differently with the rise of neoliberalism, would go beyond this article’s scope. Nevertheless, no aspect of capitalist culture, including sexual culture, exists in complete isolation from the mode of production as a whole; fundamental shifts in capitalism are detectable, however indirectly, at the level of gender and sexuality as at other levels of the systemic totality. This basic understanding can give us the audacity, even in the absence of fully worked-out mediations, to point out some trends that correspond to changing class-dynamics in LGBT communities.

A large proportion of the institutions that define LGBT communities and produce their self-images tend to reproduce and defend a unifying lesbian/gay identity in apparent continuity with the identity that took shape by the 1970s. But even a schematic analysis can show that classic lesbian/gay subcultures and identities were put under pressure or into question in various ways by the decline of Fordism. Ultimately, as the class and social reality of LGBT communities became more fragmented and conflict-ridden, so did their ideological and even sexual expressions. In the end, the ‘mode of production of material life condition[ed] [their] social, political and intellectual life process in general’; their ‘social being . . . determine[d] their consciousness’.

The changes have included development of a queer identity seen at least in part as in opposition to existing lesbian/gay identities, a growing visibility of transgender identities, and the proliferation of a variety of other identities linked to specific sexual practices or rôles. Despite these identities’ extraordinary diversity, their rootedness in characteristics of contemporary capitalism can be detected in a number of more-or-less common features. Whether or not they are explicitly defined as queer, they respond to the increasingly repressive character of the neoliberal order through their stubborn affirmation of sexual practices that are still – or are increasingly – stigmatised. They also reflect the growing inequality and polarisation of neoliberal capitalism by making sexual power-differentials explicit, and above all through gender-nonconformity.

To understand these features better, this article looks briefly, first, at the material basis of the emergence of lesbian/gay identity by the 1970s, and second at the material basis of factors that have been fracturing it. It then

examines the ways in which economic changes have been ideologically mediated in new expressions of gender and sexual identity, particularly among transgendered and other queers. The last section discusses the political implications of these changes and the challenges facing twenty-first-century LGBT communities.

I. Classic gay identity

Classic lesbian/gay identity, as opposed to the many other forms of same-sex identity that have existed in human history, is (or was) an identity reserved for people whose primary sexual and emotional ties are with their own sex; who generally do not conclude heterosexual marriages or form heterosexual families (unlike, say, latter-day gay icon Oscar Wilde); who do not radically change their gender-identity in adopting a lesbian/gay sexuality (unlike transgendered people in a great variety of cultures); and in which both partners in relationships consider themselves part of the same lesbian/gay community (a bizarre notion to millions of men around the world who fuck men or boys without considering themselves gay, and to millions of women at the less explicit end of the ‘lesbian continuum’).18

This kind of gay identity emerged in developed capitalist countries in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries mainly among middle-class layers (middle-class consumption was particularly crucial to capital-accumulation in the expansive long wave that lasted from the mid-1890s to the mid-1910s). In this same period, declining birth-rates and advancements in birth-control made procreation less crucial as a focus of at least middle-class sexuality, and sexual desire and object-choice more crucial. The growing importance of consumption and desire helped foster a shift in the construction of gender under capitalism, from conceptions of ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ focused on the innate character required for production and reproduction, to conceptions of masculinity and femininity that were (in Judith Butler’s term) more ‘performative’,19 defined to a greater extent by patterns of consumption, dress and everyday behaviour.20 In this same period, middle-class men and women (particularly women with education and professions) increasingly had

the economic and social resources to live independently of their families and to defy convention.

As John D’Emilio explained in a seminal article, capitalist development in this way created the conditions for the rise of gay identity. The result was the reification of sexual desire based on gendered object-choice, the rapid spread among the middle-classes of medical and later specifically psychoanalytical visions of sexuality, and ‘the invention of heterosexuality’ as well as homosexuality as sexological and social categories. Working-class and poor people even in developed countries, by contrast, tended well into the twentieth century to focus on conceptions of manhood and womanhood rather than reified conceptions of sexuality. Working-class men in the US in particular continued to form relationships between transgendered people (‘fairies’) on the one hand and non-transgendered, often married men on the other, or to engage in sex with other men for money or social benefit without taking on any distinctive sexual identity. In the same period in Germany, a homosexuality defined as masculine was notably championed by the middle-class ‘Community of the Special’, while Magnus Hirschfeld’s studies of same-sex relations among largely working-class men led him to uphold a transgender ‘third sex’-model.

After 1945, however, working-class living standards in capitalist countries went up rapidly under the Fordist order, in which increases in labour-productivity were matched to a large extent by increasing real wages that sustained increasing effective demand, and various forms of social insurance cushioned the blows that hit working people during dips in the business-cycle. As a result, for the first time masses of working-class people – living off what D’Emilio, following Marx, calls ‘free’ labour – as well as students and others were also able to live independently of their families, and give sexual object-choice a greater rôle in their lives and identities.

Working-class family-structures and gender-rôles also changed. For the first time since the mid- to late-nineteenth century – when the family-wage had become a cherished ideal, and sometimes a reality, for broad working-class layers – the Second World-War made waged work at least temporarily normal for even respectable working-class and middle-class women. This made a dent in the pronounced gender-polarisation that had been characteristic of both working-class heterosexuality and homosexuality in the first decades of the

twentieth century. In fact, as evidence from both the US and the Netherlands shows, emerging lesbian/gay communities and organisations in the postwar period tended increasingly to squelch effeminacy among gay men and masculinity among lesbians. At the same time, higher funding for education and expansion of a social safety-net (in developed countries at least) decreased people’s economic dependence on parents to support them as students or young people, on spouses to help pay the rent, and on children to save them from poverty in old age. Full employment meant more job-opportunities for some people who had previously been marginalised.

The combination of increased economic possibilities and a reconfiguration of gender-rôles helped many more people in the 1950s and 1960s shape a sexually hedonistic culture extending beyond the largely middle-class limits of the earlier nonconformist milieu of the 1910s and 1920s. Within this broad hedonistic culture it became possible for a growing minority to form same-sex relationships and networks. While ‘Fordist mass consumption was, above all, an attempt to secure a broad and sustained accumulation of capital’, the diversification of consumer-marketing that it entailed created space for an ‘underground circulation of homoerotic images’ in ‘an increasingly less underground gay male [and lesbian] network’.28

What remained to prevent people from living openly lesbian/gay lives were the constraints of the law, police, employers, landlords, and social pressure of many sorts. The lesbian/gay movements of the 1960s and ’70s rebelled against these constraints, inspired by a wave of other social rebellions: black, youth, anti-war, feminist and (at least in some European countries) working-class.29 Supplementing the attempts of early lesbian/gay groups to discipline their members’ gender-norms, the second wave of feminism was key in drastically reining in the butch-femme patterns that were still largely hegemonic in 1950s lesbian subcultures (or at least in turning them into ‘a subterranean game’).30

The first lesbian/gay legal victories in the 1970s made mass, open lesbian/gay/bisexual (LGB) communities possible in the developed countries for the first time in history. Among the preconditions for these communities were the general increase in people’s living standards and economic security, which made autonomous lesbian/gay lives possible; the fact that the millions of people who came out around the 1970s had a certain relative social homogeneity, thanks in part to generational bonds of the baby-boom and in part to the narrowing of economic divides in the 1950s and ’60s, so that there

30. Califia 2003, p. 3.
were fewer barriers to a common sense of identity; and a relatively favourable political/cultural climate.

The homogeneity of 1970s lesbian/gay communities was of course relative. Class and sexual differences always existed. The relative ease with which women and men coexisted in the early years of gay liberation lasted only until women became too fed-up with the treatment they often received at the hands of gay men. Although gender-norms relaxed to a certain extent in the 1960s and '70s, this led to a true devaluation of masculinity and femininity only in the context of a radical-feminist critique, which was never hegemonic; even in the New Left, gender-relaxing countercultural influences coexisted with Third-Worldist macho posturing. Racism was always a reality. Differences that existed in the 1970s became far greater in the 1980s and 1990s, however, for reasons that go deeper than an inevitable sorting-out.

II. Gays in the post-Fordist economy

The depressive long wave that began by 1974–5 was met by the late 1970s with a neoliberal offensive. This offensive included (to be very schematic): a shift to ‘Toyotist’ production-techniques and to ‘lean production’ generally; economic globalisation, liberalisation and deregulation, taking advantage of new technologies that ‘accelerated the speed and dispersed the space of production’, privatisation of many public enterprises and social services; an increase in the wealth and power of capital at labour’s expense; an increase in inequality among countries (through the debt-crisis and structural-adjustment policies) and within countries (through regressive tax and welfare-‘reforms’ and attacks on unions), and luxury-consumption that increasingly replaced mass-consumption as a motor of economic growth. This offensive among other things fragmented the world’s working classes. Big differences (re) surfaced between better and worse-paid workers, permanent and temporary workers, white and black, native-born and immigrant, employed and unemployed. The less pronounced differences in income and job-security in

34. One study of wage-trends shows that among manufacturing workers in the US, ‘inequality soared in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching levels far higher than those existing during the Depression. The recovery after 1994 brought inequality down again, but only to just below that of the worst years of the 1930s’ (Galbraith and Cantú 2001, p. 83). Mike Davis noted ‘extreme income/skill polarization’ in the growing US healthcare, business-service, banking and real-estate sectors, resulting in a ‘split-level economy’ and ‘reshaping the traditional income pyramid into a
national working classes in the 1960s, which were the backdrop to the rise of lesbian/gay identity, became a thing of the past.

One factor complicating the neoliberal offensive was the difficulty of rolling back some of the achievements of black, women’s and lesbian/gay movements. The contradictions of these emancipatory movements in a time of working-class weakness and growing inequality were played out in many of the ideological debates of the 1980s and ’90s. Women’s equality and racial equality became steadily more established as political commonplaces (in rhetoric if not in reality) at the same time that redistributive and counter-cyclical economic policies, far less controversial 40 years ago, were dismissed as outmoded and counterproductive (until the 2008 crisis prompted massive redistribution of wealth to the world’s biggest banks and various forms of stimulus).

What has the effect of all this been on LGBT people, communities and movements?

The end of the Fordist expansive long wave was not bad news for everyone by any means, and not for all LGB people specifically. Particularly among some middle-class and upper-working-class social layers that prospered in the 1980s and ’90s, especially but not only in developed capitalist countries, commercial gay scenes continued to grow, continuing to underlie lesbian/gay identity.35

Market-friendly lesbian/gay identities prospered in commercialised spaces, in the construction of two-income households among better-off gays and to a lesser extent lesbians, and in the tolerant public space fostered by gay-rights victories. Many relatively better-paid lesbian/gay people who benefited from both economic success and gay-rights reforms have some cause to be contented with the progress they have made: ‘inside a cozy brownstone, curled up next to a health-insured domestic partner in front of a Melissa Etheridge video on MTV, flipping through Out magazine and sipping an Absolut and tonic, capitalism can feel pretty good’.36 While all social relations under capitalism are reified – distorted so that relations between people are perceived as relations with or even between things – the shift under neoliberalism to economic growth founded increasingly on middle-class overconsumption raised the reification of human relations among neoliberalism’s beneficiaries to new heights. This applied notably to sexual and emotional relations among middle-class gay men and lesbians.


The 1970s, '80s and '90s and the first decade of the new millennium were also years in which open LGBT communities and identities became more prominent in much of the dependent world, first in Latin America and later in many Asian and African countries. Given that dependent countries as a whole have suffered especially with the decline of the old forms of capital-accumulation, communities and identities there have taken on very contrasting forms.37 The period of slower growth and neoliberal reaction in the global North was a time of recurrent and devastating crisis in many parts of the South even before the generalised crisis of 2008 (notably in Latin America after 1982, in Mexico again after 1994, in much of Southeast Asia after 1997, in Brazil for several years after 1998, and in much of Africa with scarcely a breathing-space). But this did not prevent the growth of middle-classes in the South with incomes far above their countries' averages and linked to global consumer-capitalism – including gay consumer-capitalism.

Commercialised, Western-oriented lesbian/gay identities seem in this context to have a complex and contradictory relationship with other same-sex sexualities that co-exist with them in the dependent world. In many ways 'gay' and 'lesbian' are still largely middle or upper-class, US or Eurocentric concepts, even if in other ways they provide a reference-point in struggles for sexual emancipation.38

In both developed and dependent capitalist countries, the ideological and cultural sway of gay identities in LGBT communities has spread beyond the more privileged social layers in which people's lives fit these identities most comfortably. LGBT media in dependent countries rely to some extent on lesbian/gay media in the capitalist metropoles for their material and imagery.39 In the developed capitalist countries, despite the proliferation of websites and zines defining identities and subcultures for minorities within the minorities, the most widely circulated books, periodicals and videos tend to be those most closely linked to the new, predominantly middle-class, gay mainstream. Even those who are economically least well-equipped for the commercial gay scene are often dependent on it as a market for potential (short or long-term) partners; more fundamentally, even celibate or monogamous people who are at least temporarily not in the market for a partner still tend to define themselves in the culturally hegemonic categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual or straight. Even poor transgendered and queer people whose lives are most remote from the images of the gay mainstream sometimes incorporate aspects of gay mainstream-culture into their aspirations and fantasies, constructing

their identities in part from images that may be borrowed and adapted from very different social realities.

This hegemony of lesbian/gay identity over much of the LGBT world, and the physical coexistence of LGBT people of different classes in lesbian/gay spaces, provides arguments to those who downplay the importance of class in ‘mixed-class’ LGBT communities.\(^{40}\) It is true that the class-segregation that characterised early-twentieth-century LGBT scenes eased in the Fordist period. But cultural commonalities and cross-class relationships do not make lesbian/gay identity and spaces class-neutral, any more than the existence of sexual relationships between masters and slaves meant that slavery was not a significant factor in them. ‘“Undifferentiated” accounts of gay life tend to narrate relatively well-resourced and privileged experience as gay experience, and normatively promote this as a script for how gay life should be conceived and lived.’\(^{41}\) Lesbian/gay spaces are not islands, but heavily influenced by the structures of class in the surrounding societies: research on young LGBT people’s schooling in Britain, for example, identifies ‘social class as a major axis of power which positions LGBT people unequally and unjustly.’\(^{42}\) Moreover, as the next section shows, the fracturing of LGBT scenes in recent decades also has a class-dimension.

Both in the centres and at the margins of the world-capitalist system, three aspects of the lesbian/gay identity that stabilised by the early 1980s fit well with the emerging neoliberal order: the community’s self-definition as a stable minority, its increasing tendency towards gender-conformity, and marginalisation of its own sexual minorities.

Lesbians’ and gay men’s self-definition as a minority group, which built on the reification of sexual desire that progressively consolidated the categories of gay and straight over the course of the twentieth century, at the same time expressed a profound social fact about lesbian/gay life as it took shape specifically under neoliberalism. To the extent that lesbians and gays were increasingly defined as people who inhabited a certain economic space (went to certain bars, bathhouses and discos, patronised certain businesses, and, in the US at least, even lived to some extent in certain neighbourhoods), they were more ghettoised than before, more clearly demarcated from a majority defined as straight. The fact that a fair proportion of those in the bars and bathhouses were always people with at least one foot in the straight world, sometimes even married people with children, was always an open secret, but one which few people announced with fanfare; they were generally seen as

\(^{40}\) For example, Seidman 2011.
\(^{41}\) Heaphy 2011.
\(^{42}\) McDermott 2011, p. 64.
people who were still half ‘in the closet’, tended to be discreet in order to avoid unpleasantness, and were in any event generally marginal to the developing lesbian/gay culture. The fact that people continued to come out and join the community at all ages – or, for that matter, sometimes form heterosexual relationships at later ages and as a result often decrease their participation in the community – was also none too visible.

The tendency of many early theorists of lesbian/gay liberation to question the categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, emphasise the fluidity of sexual identity and speculate about universal bisexuality tended to fade away with time as the community’s material reality became more sharp-edged. The lesbian/gay-rights movement accordingly ran less risk of seeming sexually subversive of the broader sexual order of gendered capitalism.

The decline of butch/femme rôle-playing among lesbians and of camp culture among gay men also contributed to a hardening of the gender-boundaries that remain central to capitalist societies. The drag queens who, rebelling against the postwar tightening of gender-discipline, had played a leading rôle in the 1969 Stonewall rebellion found that as social tolerance of lesbians and gays in general began to increase in the 1970s, social tolerance for gender-nonconformity in many lesbian/gay spaces decreased once more. In the earlier, smaller community of the immediate post-Stonewall years, non-gender-conforming gay men and lesbians, less able or less inclined to hide, had been a higher proportion of the visible lesbian/gay milieu; as lesbian/gay communities expanded, the influx of more ‘normal-seeming’ lesbians and gay men diluted the prominence of transgendered people. In addition, the less polarised gender-rôles in the broader culture, which had initially facilitated the emergence of lesbian/gay identities, now increasingly restricted the room available for more gender-polarised lesbian/gay identities. Although the temporary relaxation of gender-norms in the 1960s had created some space for playful gender-bending, full-fledged drag often seemed anomalous and even embarrassing in the context of the androgynous imagery that was in vogue in the early 1970s.

LGB communities thus increasingly defined themselves in ways that placed transgendered people – whose communities predated the new lesbian/gay identity by millennia – and other visible nonconformists on the margins, if not completely out of bounds. Kevin Floyd’s identification of ‘an ongoing, radical uncertainty about whether gay male sexual practice necessarily feminizes any of the men involved’43 does not do justice to the ways in which the relation between gender and sexuality is configured differently at different times and

43. Floyd 2009, p. 64.
locations within a global-capitalist totality that is neither static nor uniform, but rather strongly differentiated by period, class, gender, and the processes of combined and uneven development. We have seen, for example, that transgendered sexuality was more common in the working class than in the middle-class in developed countries in the early-twentieth century, as it still tends to be in some parts of the dependent world. The late 1970s, at the cusp of the transition from Fordism to neoliberalism, was the time in developed countries when space for transgendered sexualities (and thus Floyd’s ‘radical uncertainty’) was at its historical nadir.

While gay-male sexuality was masculinised and lesbianism feminised, the increased centrality of consumption to LGB identity resulted in a series of shifts in its sexual contours, some already apparent by the late 1970s and early '80s, others emerging only in the '90s or later. Obviously these shifts did not reflect an instantaneous, spontaneous sea-change in all LGBT people's felt desires or sexual practices. Individual desire and psychology are more resilient than that and are shaped over the course of lifetimes, not totally transmuted by the social developments of a decade or two. In some cases the winds of erotic fashion undoubtedly have shallower causes than profound socioeconomic change, and it would be a mistake to read too much into them. But when sexual identities and imagery took on more unequal and gender-polarised forms at just the time when the surrounding societies were undergoing a sharp, long-term rise in inequality, it would be implausible to dismiss the correlation as pure coincidence.

In any event, as the decline of Fordism put welfare-state programmes under pressure, a renewed emphasis on the centrality of the family to social reproduction helped put a brake on the relaxation of gender-norms that had characterised the 1960s. This conservative turn in the broader society was accompanied by a shift among gay men from the largely androgynous imagery and occasional gender-bending of the early 1970s to the more masculine ‘clone’-culture that took hold by the early '80s. Feminine forms of self-presentation that lesbian feminists once frowned on had also become more common and acceptable among ‘lipstick-lesbians’ by the 1990s – a ‘celebration of femininity’ that Gayle Rubin, for example, thought could ‘reinforce traditional gender roles and values of appropriate female behavior’.44 A higher degree of gender-conformity among LGB people facilitated their incorporation into a neoliberal social and sexual order.

This conformity was congenial for the growing number of gay men and lesbians who pursued professional, business or political careers in a number of

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capitalist societies, without necessarily renouncing or hiding their sexuality but preferably without ‘flaunting’ it. Even the lesbian/gay middle-class layers that live off gay businesses and nonprofits – far from all of whom were among the real economic winners of recent decades, but who tended to be spoken for by those among them who were – preferred in general to keep LGB community-expressions culturally inoffensive. Another layer of middle-class or middle-class-identified lesbian/gay people, who were making their careers inside mainstream businesses and institutions, sometimes cringed at manifestations of a lesbian/gay community that marked them off too much from other people of their class. Many of these people would like to be able to pursue their careers in straight companies and institutions while being open about their same-sex relationships – fewer people are willing to contract heterosexual marriages these days and to keep their homosexual lives completely hidden and marginal – and for the rest deny or minimise differences between them and middle-class straights.

This professional layer has provided the solid social base for the most moderate currents of LGB movements, which have often seen same-sex marriage as the culminating moment in the process of gay emancipation. And, in fact, same-sex marriage and adoption can be the culmination of some LGBT people’s integration into the productive and reproductive order of gendered capitalism. Paradoxically, while neoliberalism has in many ways undermined the direct and obvious domination of wives and daughters by husbands and fathers under the original Fordist gender-régime, neoliberal cutbacks in social services, by privatising the provision of basic needs, have been restoring the centrality of the family-unit to the social reproduction of labour – in classed ways. While legal same-sex marriage or partnership can in this context secure new benefits for middle-class and privileged working-class lesbians and gays, for those most dependent on the welfare-state in countries such as Britain and the Netherlands legal recognition of their partnerships can lead to cuts in benefits.

As the number of children being raised in households headed by same-sex couples has risen, same-sex marriage and adoption can serve to legitimise and regulate the growing rôle that lesbian and gay couples are playing in social production, consumption and reproduction. Yet the rise of same-sex-couple-headed nuclear families redefines and even reinforces rather than overcomes the gay-straight divide, since the ways in which lesbians and gay men form

families (through sperm-donorship, adoption, the break-up of straight families or other trajectories) necessarily remain distinctive.

In the twenty-first century, an ideological factor has also played a crucial rôle in integrating lesbian/gay people into the neoliberal order: the instrumentalisation of lesbian/gay rights in the service of imperialist and Islamophobic ideologies, which Jasbir Puar has defined as ‘homonationalism’.47 Particularly but not only in countries such as the Netherlands48 and Denmark, where both same-sex partnership-rights and anti-immigrant racism are strongly developed, this homonationalism has been key to consolidating and taming lesbian/gay identity.

III. Social and sexual roots of alternative identities

The apparent uniformity of lesbian/gay culture in the mid-1970s in fact helped disguise social and economic fractures opening up among LGB people. As a result, the relatively homogeneous lesbian/gay identities that had taken shape in North America and Western Europe by the 1970s were challenged and fragmented over the following decades, though to different degrees in different countries. There has been, in particular, a proliferation of alternative sexual or gender-identities, more-or-less outside of the mainstream commercial scene. Some, though far from all, of these alternative identities represent challenges to the basic parameters of the gay/straight divide that emerged and was consolidated through much of the twentieth century.

Contrary to much right-wing anti-gay rhetoric, the prosperous couples focused on by glossy lesbian/gay magazines were never typical of LGBTs in general. Data gathered by the US National Opinion Research Center’s General Social Survey in the 1990s suggested that lesbian and bisexual women were still far less likely than other women to have professional or technical jobs and more likely to have service or craft/operative jobs, while gay and bisexual men were more likely than other men to have professional/technical, clerical/sales or service-jobs but less likely to have managerial jobs.49 The heteronormative constraints of many economic sectors – the pressures to abide by a heterosexual norm of behaviour – seems to drive many ‘low-wage service workers… to accept a lower wage than they would be paid elsewhere in exchange for the relative comfort of working in a queer environment’.50

Whatever the causes (less ability or willingness to meet gendered job-expectations, migration to more competitive job-markets, discrimination), the net result (contrary to unfounded claims made not only by anti-gay ideologues but also by some gay publications) was that, at least in the US, both gay men and lesbians were under-represented in the higher-income brackets (with family-incomes of $50,000 or more), while gay men in particular were over-represented in the lower-income brackets (with family-incomes of $30,000 or less).

A more recent study showed that men in same-sex couples were still earning significantly less on average than their straight counterparts in 2005 ($43,117 compared to $49,777); while women in same-sex couples earn more on average than straight married women, their income is, of course, less than men’s. Transgendered people are even worse off: a 2006 study found that in San Francisco 60% of them earned less than $15,300 a year, only 25% had fulltime jobs, and nearly 9% had no source of income.

The expansion of LGBT communities centred on gay commercial scenes did not improve the situation of lower-income LGBTs. On the contrary, Jeffrey Escoffier has noted that ‘the gay market, like markets in general, tends to segment the lesbian and gay community by income, by class, by race and by gender’. This is especially true of same-sex couples, particularly same-sex couples raising children together, since two women living together are in a sense doubling the economic disadvantages they both experience as women. LGBTs are, moreover, more likely to be cut off from broader family-support networks, and as the social safety-net has frayed, inequalities resulting from wage-differentials have affected them with particular intensity.

Across the capitalist world, the welfare-state has been shredded, unions have been weakened, and inequality has grown. In this context, polarisation within LGBT communities has been particularly great. Lower-income LGBs, transgendered people, street-youth and LGBT people of colour have been under assault in various ways in recent decades, as attacks on poor people and minorities have multiplied, racism has intensified even more in the US, and new forms of antagonism to black and immigrant communities (especially of Muslim origin) have grown up in European countries. Young LGBTs and sex-workers in particular have been victims of intensified forms of coercive

policing. One of the first notable mutations in LGBT identity with the rise of neoliberalism was the role that SM and leather played in the more masculine culture that took hold among gay men by the early 1980s. While one gay-male leather-bar opened in New York as early as 1955 and many more followed by the early 1970s, only from 1976 on did leather-culture become a subject of attention and debate in the broader lesbian/gay community. Soon SM came to be linked with male homosexuality in the eighties as firmly as effeminacy and an attack on gender roles was in the sixties and early seventies, while SM clubs such as New York’s Mineshaft became an arena for the masculinization of the gay male.

Paradoxically at this stage, while divisions between ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’ that would earlier have been widely rejected on liberationist grounds became acceptable and sometimes blatant, virtually all the men in the scene were masculinised in the process. It was as if SM, while celebrating ‘difference and power’, served, in Dennis Altman’s term, as a ritual of ‘catharsis’, of both acting out and exorcising the growing violence and inequality of the broader society. As Gayle Rubin put it, ‘class, race, and gender neither determine nor correspond to the roles adopted for S/M play.

By the early 1980s, forms of sexuality that diverged from the perceived feminist norm also affected the previously hegemonic lesbian-feminist culture. Lesbian-feminist culture in a sense already struck a divergent note in the 1970s. The sense has persisted that lesbians in general play less of a role in commercial scenes and persevere more in trying to sustain alternative scenes. While of course some lesbians, like some gay men, are middle-class or rich, the fact that women trying to survive independently of men have lower incomes on average and are thus more likely to be working-class or poor has contributed to this sense.

But while lesbian feminists had put working-class and poor women under great pressure in the 1970s to abandon butch-femme relationships that had been common among them for decades, some lesbians began in the 1980s to

56. Sears 2005, p. 103.
defend butch-femme vigorously. At about the same time some lesbians took a visible part in SM culture, particularly in San Francisco. This dovetailed with a general upheaval in the lesbian world through conflict between currents that defined themselves as ‘anti-pornography’ and others that defined themselves as ‘pro-sex’.

The most explosive issue in the ‘sex-wars’ was, briefly, the issue of intergenerational sex, which was the subject of a major confrontation during the organisation of the first US national lesbian/gay-rights march in 1979. Going beyond understandable and legitimate concerns about coercion and abuse of authority, some currents perceived power-differences between adults and youths as precluding the possibility of consent to sex. However, the very explosiveness of the issue quickly placed it beyond the pale of discussion.

In hindsight, the ‘clone’ and SM subcultures, lipstick-lesbianism and sex-wars of the 1980s were only an initial phase in a longer-term fracturing of LGBT identity. The consolidation of Reaganism and Thatcherism by the mid-1980s coincided for LGBT people with the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, a trauma experienced as a sharp generational break. While some men who survived the epidemic followed a gay variant of the trajectory of the middle-class baby-boom generation, many younger people who came of age in the era of AIDS and neoliberalism found the road to a safer middle-class existence strewn with obstacles.

Beginning in the mid-1980s a queer social milieu emerged, made up to a large extent of young people on the bottom of the unequal social hourglass that had resulted from economic restructuring. One aspect of the underlying social reality is that the lower young queers’ incomes were and the more meagre their job-prospects, the less on average they identified with or wanted to join the lesbian/gay community that had grown up since the 1960s and ‘70s. ‘Economic changes . . . meant more part-time and contract work, especially for young people, which left many unable to see a place for themselves in the by then established gay middle class.’

Above all initially in English-speaking developed-capitalist countries – the developed countries where social polarisation is greatest – young queers resisted disco-culture, a bar-centred ghetto, and the kind of segregation that fit

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64. The state enforces a related point of view, as shown in hundreds of prosecutions of LGBT people each year under age-of-consent laws, the repeated prosecutions of the Canadian gay paper Body Politic for discussing the issue in print, and US Senator Jesse Helms’s successful move to block UN recognition of any LGBT group that condones ‘paedophilia’.
with ethnic-style minority-group politics. Self-identified queers refused 'to be comfortable on the social periphery – in the ghettos'. English-speaking queer scenes have been echoed in some ways by queers in squatters’ milieus in continental Western Europe. This generation had also grown up in far more diverse and changeable family-structures, which made the notion of modelling lesbian/gay households on traditional straight ones all the more implausible for them. In some milieus of young rebels, gender and sexual categories have become more fluid than would be usual in mainstream straight, gay male or lesbian scenes.

Economic marginalisation and cultural alienation were closely interlinked in the emergence of a queer milieu, making it hard in many cases to say to what extent poverty was a cause of alienation, to what extent the choice of a queer lifestyle contributed to more-or-less voluntary poverty, and to what extent some queers were middle-class gays – particularly students and academics – dressing and talking like down-and-outs, in some cases perhaps only for a period of a few years of ‘float[ing] in and out of deviance or propriety’. In other cases queerness may be defined so much by dress, style or performance that it becomes as much a matter of consumer-choice and an expression of reification as the middle-class gay identities it rejects.

Nevertheless, the overall correlation between lower incomes and queer self-identification seems clear.

If economic pressures made integration into the dominant lesbian/gay culture a dubious proposition for many young and disadvantaged queers in developed countries, the barriers have been all the greater for poor and working-class LGBTs in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Dependent capitalist countries have been the site over the last forty years of social constructions of sexuality that are neither completely different from the predominant lesbian/gay identities in imperialist countries in the 1970s nor merely expressions of a single ‘modern’, globalised identity. Sexualities that were indigenous to the dependent world’s precapitalist or early-capitalist social formations (such as the traditional transgender identities of Southeast Asia and Latin America) have persisted, while coexisting with lesbian/gay identities.

The result of this intersection of dependent development, sexuality and culture was that poor and working-class LGBT people in the dependent world were less likely than middle-class LGBs to have identities (let alone incomes) that facilitated their integration into a Westernised, commercialised

70. Drucker 1996.
They were more likely to be transgendered people, more likely to be subject to violence, and more likely to be dependent on family and/or community-structures for their survival. The economic marginalisation that they experience tended to make post-Fordist lesbian/gay identity at least as problematic and alien for them as for young self-identified queers in North America or Britain.

Marginalisation of millions of LGBT people worldwide because they are poor, young or black has impelled many of them towards developing or adopting identities that have broken to some extent with the dominant patterns of post-Fordist gay identity. As we have seen, the dominant trend since the 1980s, based particularly on the reality of more prosperous LGB people’s lives, was for the lesbian/gay community to define itself as a stable and distinct minority, tend increasingly towards gender-conformity, and marginalise its own sexual minorities. By contrast, the nonconformist sexual and gender-identities that have grown up among more marginalised layers have tended to be non-homonormative: to identify with broader communities of oppressed or rebellious people, to fail to conform to dominant gender-norms, and/or to emphasise power-differentials that dominant lesbian/gay imagery tends to elide. While these counter-identities have shown little sign of coalescing into any overarching alternative identity – on the contrary, different counter-identities can and do clash with each other – they do share a number of features that correspond to structural similarities in their bearers’ positions under neoliberal capitalism.

Non-homonormative identities defined by marginalisation on the basis of age, class, region and/or ethnicity have overlapped with the growth or persistence of subcultures that have been marginal in the commercial scene because they constitute (sometimes extensive) niche markets at best and illicit ones at worse. The relationship between alternative identities and marginalised sexual practices is elusive, but there does appear to be a correlation. There are, of course, many LGBTs who limit their sexual rebellion to the safety of a particular brand of bar. But the more attached people are to their sexual identities, the more reluctant many of them become to give them up at work or in public.

Not coincidentally, the more visible transgendered people are, the less likely they are in most societies to get one of the well-paid, permanent, full-time jobs that have become scarcer and more coveted commodities in post-Fordist economies. Moreover, some people are virtually or entirely incapable of hiding

72. See, for example, Drucker 1993, p. 29.
aspects of their identities, particularly effeminacy in men or butchness in women, that are often rightly or wrongly associated with sexualities that are neither hetero- nor homonormative. Voluntary or involuntary, tell-tale signs of sexual deviance often lead to management’s excluding people from professional or service-jobs or to fellow workers’ hostility that impels people to avoid or flee certain workplaces. Paradoxically, in the absence of general guarantees for workers’ job-security or free expression at work, anti-discrimination laws that protect LGB people in general may be of less than no use to the sexually marginalised, as Ruthann Robson has noted: ‘If a company employs four lesbians, a new manager can fearlessly fire the one who has her nose pierced or who is most outspoken or who walks the dykiest.’73

These factors help explain the correlation that exists between subaltern social positions and various alternative sexual scenes and identities that do not fit into standard post-Fordist lesbian/gay moulds. This is not a straightforward correlation between non-homonormative identities and working-class affiliation. On the contrary, working-class lesbians and gays and lesbians and gays of colour (sometimes, of course, the same people) have sometimes reacted against self-defined queer or other sexually dissident groups when such groups demanded visibility of them that would make their lives more difficult in particular workplaces or communities.74 The correlation has been rather with particular sectors of the working class – on average younger, less skilled, less organised and lower-paid – that have expanded since the 1970s.

Part of the younger queer generation has taken up, and to some extent recast, claims for some of the stigmatised sexual practices that were made during the sex-wars of the early 1980s. In doing so they have rebelled against homonormative ‘confining straightjackets that inserted some queers as the tolerated “others” within the existing social relations of gender and sexuality and marginalized others’.75 ‘“Queer” [thus] potentially includes “deviants” and “perverts” who may traverse or confuse the homo/hetero division’.76

By contrast with the earlier period, SM has been less in the forefront – SM seems less politically laden now than it was in the sex-wars of the early 1980s – and gender-bending and transgender all the more. SM seems to have become less central to LGBT culture as it has increasingly, in diluted form, come to permeate the broader sexual culture, as seen in the spread of piercing, tattooing, and leather-fashion and accessories. Among LGBTs, the queer generation has

74. Drucker 1993, p. 29.
75. Sears 2005, p. 100.
76. Hennessy 2000, p. 113.
tended more to play with issues of inequality and power-difference in other ways that expose their artificiality and facilitate their subversion.

The contradictions of gender and power have been particularly visible in transgender and gender-bending subcultures since the 1990s. As Dennis Altman points out, drag has always to a certain extent subverted mainstream gender-rôles through ‘veneration of the strong woman who defies social expectations to assert herself’;77 and Judith Butler has argued that drag subverts gender by exposing it as a ‘performatively enacted signification’.78 Forms of gender-bending have shifted over the decades, however. In the 1980s, Amber Hollibaugh proclaimed that her vision of butch/femme was not a reaffirmation of existing gender-categories but a new system of ‘gay gender’. More recently, younger transgendered people seem more likely to take on gender-identities that are difficult to subsume (if at all) under existing feminine or masculine rôles. ‘Today lesbian butch/femme is acquiring more flexibility than it had in the ’70s when I came out’, says Patrick Califia, thanks in part to a cross-pollination of butch/femme with SM which creates space for ‘butch bottoms’ and ‘femme tops’.79 These more flexible and ambiguous forms of transgender can be associated simultaneously with the myriad forms of transgender that have existed for millennia around the planet, and with queer milieus that have only emerged since the late 1980s in rebellion against the lesbian/gay mainstream. They are thus, in a sense, very old and very new.

New forms of transgender contrast with the forms of transexuality, which themselves arose only in the 1950s and ’60s, as defined by a wing of the medical establishment. The medical experts not only tend to prescribe sex-reassignment surgery as the standard cure for intense gender-nonconformity but also tend to urge transexuals to adapt (perhaps somewhat less rigidly than in the past) to the norms of their ‘new gender’.80 Queer-identified transgendered people do not necessarily reject hormone-treatments or surgery, but they can be selective in what they do or do not choose for themselves. Califia links this new trend among transgendered people to SM people’s attitude towards ‘body-modification’: ‘A new sort of transgendered person has emerged, one who approaches sex reassignment with the same mindset that they would obtaining a piercing or a tattoo’.81 Often these transpeople do not see themselves as transitioning from male to female or vice versa, but rather as transgendered as opposed to male or female.

78. Butler 1999, p. 44.
More traditional poor and working-class transpeople for their part can often struggle for years to save the money for their operations, including in dependent countries, or simply change each others’ genitals without resorting to official medicine. The thousands of transgender *hijras* in South Asia, increasingly visible and militant among the poorest people of their region and notably at the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, do not often seem to share European and North American queers’ interest in transcending or blurring gender-categories. For that matter, even many intersex people (born with genitals that do not identify them as unambiguously male or female) ‘are perfectly comfortable adopting either a male or female gender identity’.\(^{82}\)

Just the same, many LGBTs in dependent countries have been trying in their own ways to resist pressures to claim them for a homogeneous, middle-class-dominated lesbian/gay community, purge them of ‘old-fashioned’ aspects of their identities, or make them come out in ways that would tear them away from their families and communities without providing them with equivalent support-systems. Chilean writer Pedro Lemebel, for example, has expressed his identification with Santiago’s downtrodden *locas* [transvestites] and his rejection of the gay-male model he encountered in New York.\(^{83}\)

To a greater or lesser extent, different forms of transgender are radically subversive of the lesbian/gay identity that emerged under Fordism, in a way that the would-be all-encompassing acronym LGBT fails to successfully subsume in a single social subject. Transexuals who identify as straight (albeit ‘born in the wrong body’) often question what they have in common with lesbians, gays or bisexuals. South Asian *hijras*, identifying with neither gender, cannot be legitimately classified as either gay or straight. Nor can transgendered queers who insist that they have moved beyond male and female.

In capitalism both North and South in this time of crisis, then, lesbian/gay identity has been undergoing simultaneous construction and fracturing.\(^{84}\) A very diverse and diffuse set of alternative sexual identities has been diverging more and more from the post-Fordist, gender-conformist, consumerist lesbian/gay mainstream, and in some cases challenge the very social and conceptual basis of straight or lesbian/gay self-definition.

### IV. Implications for liberation

Recognising the deep roots of the fracturing of same-sex identities necessarily puts in question any universalism that ignores class, gender, sexual, cultural,

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84. Drucker 2000a.
racial/ethnic and other differences within LGBT communities. These communities and identities are being fractured in large part by fundamental changes in the productive and reproductive order of gendered capitalism. Young queers, working-class and poor LGBTs, transgendered people and other marginalised groups have increasingly found themselves in objectively different situations from people in the consolidating gay mainstream. It is thus no surprise that they have tended to some extent to define distinct identities.

The forms taken by alternative, non-homonormative sexual identities do not necessarily win them easy acceptance among feminists or socialists. The lesbian/gay identity that emerged by the 1970s had much to commend it from the broad-Left’s point of view (once the Left had largely overcome its initial homophobia). By contrast, transgendered and other queers can raise the hackles of many on the Left, since their sexuality strikes many as at variance with the mores to be expected and hoped for in an egalitarian, peaceful, rational future.

One may doubt, however, whether any sexuality existing under capitalism can serve as a model for sexualities to be forecast or desired under socialism. Nor is it useful to privilege any particular existing form of sexuality in present-day struggles for sexual liberation. Socialists’ aim should not be to replace the traditional ‘hierarchical system of sexual value’ with a new hierarchy of our own.

As Amber Hollibaugh pointed out many years ago, sexual history has first of all to be ‘able to talk realistically about what people are sexually’. And in radical struggles over sexuality, as in radical struggles over production, the basic imperative is to welcome and stimulate self-organisation and resistance by people subjected to exploitation, exclusion, marginalisation or oppression, in the forms that oppressed people’s own experience proves to be most effective.

This is not to say that Marxists should simply adopt a liberal attitude of unthinking approval of sexual diversity in general, in a spirit of ‘anything goes’. Our central concern must be to advance the sexual liberation of the working class and its allies, who today include straights, LGBs and – particularly among its most oppressed layers – transgendered and other queers. Resisting the retreat from class in LGBT activism and queer studies, Marxists should combat heterosexism and bourgeois hegemony among straights, homonormativity and bourgeois hegemony among LGBs, and blanket hostility to straights and non-queer-identified gays where it exists among

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self-identified queers. This will require seeking new tactics and forms of organising within LGBT movements.

The post-Stonewall lesbian/gay movement waged an effective fight against discrimination and won many victories on the basis of an identity widely shared by those engaged in same-sex erotic or emotional relationships. But this classic lesbian/gay identity has not been the only basis in history for movements for sexual emancipation. In the German homophile-struggle from 1897 to 1933, for example, Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific-Humanitarian Committee, the wing of the movement closer to the social-democratic Left, tended to put forward polarised ‘third sex’-theories. This is what one might predict on the basis of the evidence that egalitarian gay identities were at first primarily a middle-class phenomenon, while transgender and gender-polarised patterns persisted longer in the working class and among the poor. Today in the dependent world as well, transgender identities seem to be more common among the less prosperous and less Westernised. Rather than privileging same-sex sexualities more common among the less oppressed, however superficially egalitarian, the Left should be particularly supportive of those same-sex sexualities more common among the most oppressed, however polarised.

Another important consideration is the challenge that alternative, non-homonormative sexualities can sometimes pose to the reification of sexual desire that the categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and straight embody. Marxists question the fantasy of consumers under neoliberalism that obtaining the ‘right’ commodities will define them as unique individuals and secure their happiness; we should not uncritically accept an ideology that defines individuals and their happiness on the basis of a quest for a partner of the ‘right’ gender.

How will LGBT communities and movements be structured in a time of increasingly divergent identities? Self-defined queer activist-groups, which emerged initially in the US and Britain in the early 1990s, have also appeared in recent years in a number of countries in continental Europe. They pose a

90. Kevin Floyd argues that ‘the reifying of sexual desire needs to be understood as a condition of possibility for a complex, variable history of sexually nonnormative discourses, practices, sites, subjectivities, imaginaries, collective formations, and collective aspirations’ (Floyd 2009, pp. 74–5). Having earlier recalled Lukács’s later criticism of the conflation of objectification and reification in his History and Class Consciousness, Floyd here reproduces it upside down, celebrating both as Lukács had rejected both. Objectification, the alternate adoption of subject and object-positions in an interplay between different human individuals, is inherent to sexuality; reification, the petrifaction of specific rôles and sexual identities, is not.
radical challenge to mainstream lesbian/gay organisations, although they have yet to show much of an orientation towards large-scale mobilisation, to take root among the racially and nationally oppressed, or to prove their adaptability to the dependent world. In countries where civil rights and same-sex marriage have been won, the process of seeking new horizons and finding appropriate forms of organising seems likely to be a prolonged one – especially since the LGBT social and political landscape seems likely to remain more fragmented and conflict-ridden than it was in the immediate post-Stonewall period. While lesbian/gay identity has lost the central place it occupied in the LGBT world of the 1970s and ’80s, it is still far from marginalised; on the contrary, the new homonormativity shows no signs of succumbing to queer assaults in the foreseeable future.

In the dependent world particularly, the diversity of LGBT communities has resulted in an alliance-model of organising as an alternative or a supplement to the model of a single, broad, unified organisation. The broadest possible unity across different identities remains desirable in basic fights against violence, criminalisation and discrimination as well as more ambitious struggles for equality, for example in parenting. On other issues, LGBT rights can be best defended by working and demanding space within broader movements, such as trade-unions, the women’s movement and the global-justice movement. At the same time, an alliance-model has in some cases facilitated the process of negotiating unity among constituencies – such as transgendered people on the one hand and lesbian/gay people on the other – who are unlikely to feel fully included in any one unitary structure. It can constitute a united front between those whose identities fit the basic parameters of the gay-straight divide and those whose identities do not, fostering the development of a truly queer conception of sexuality that, in Gloria Wekker’s words, is ‘multiple, malleable, dynamic, and possessing male and female elements’. In a more visionary perspective, developing an inclusive, queer conception of sexuality can be seen as a way to move towards that ‘truly free civilization’ that Herbert Marcuse described a half-century ago in Eros and Civilization, in which ‘all laws are self-given by the individuals’, the values of ‘play and display’ triumph over those of ‘productiveness and performance’, the entire human

91. For discussions from an anticapitalist perspective of the potential and limits of queer radicalism, see Drucker 1993 and Drucker 2010.
92. On sexual politics in the global-justice movement, see Drucker 2009.
personality is eroticised, and the ‘instinctual substance’ of ‘the perversions . . .
may well express itself in other forms’.95

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