

Against Equality, Against Marriage

An Introduction

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A PROGRESS NARRATIVE

THE HISTORY OF GAY MARRIAGE supposedly goes something like this: In the beginning, gay people were horribly oppressed. Then came the 1970s, where gays—all of whom looked like the men of The Village People—were able to live openly and have a lot of sex. Then, in the 1980s, many gay people died of AIDS—because they had too much sex in the 1970s. This taught them that gay sex is bad. The gays who were left realized the importance of stable, monogamous relationships and began to agitate for marriage and the 1,000+ benefits it would bring. Soon, in the very near future, with the help of supportive, married straight people—and President Obama—gays will gain marriage rights in all fifty states, and they will then be as good and productive as everyone else.

This is, obviously, a reductive and, yes, tongue-in-cheek history. But it is also, sadly, exactly the reductive history that circulates in both the straight and gay media. In a 2009 column commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, the liberal Frank Rich of *The New York Times* described the events thus: “The younger gay men—and

scattered women—who acted up at the Stonewall on those early summer nights in 1969 had little in common with their contemporaries in the front-page political movements of the time.” Rich ignored, willfully or not, the fact that Stonewall was initiated largely by unruly drag queens and transgender people, the sort who would have been avoided by the “gay men” who achieve such prominence in his sanitized version of gay history, one that reads like something from the press offices of the conservative National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) or the ultra-conservative Human Rights Campaign (HRC). Rich went on to draw an arc directly from Stonewall to the contemporary gay rights movement, as if its history were simply an upwards movement towards marriage. He even made the outrageous claim that AIDS was made much worse because those who struggled with the disease and were activists in the period were people “whose abridged rights made them even more vulnerable during a rampaging plague.” In other words, if only they had the rights bestowed upon them by marriage, gays would not have suffered quite so much.

Rich concluded that, “full gay citizenship is far from complete.” By that, of course, he meant that only marriage could guarantee “full” citizenship. He dismissed the complexity of gay history (which did not begin with Stonewall) and ignored the fact that much of gay liberation was founded on leftist and feminist principles, which included a strong materialist critique of marriage. Or that AIDS activism in the 1980s called for universal health care, the demand for which has been abandoned by the gay mainstream in favor of the idea that gays should simply be given health care via marriage.

Rich’s views are widely echoed in a world where the default liberal/progressive/left position on gay marriage is an uncritical and ahistorical support of it as a magic pill that will cure all the ills facing contemporary gays/queers. 2008 saw a spate of suicides by teens who killed themselves after relentless bullying by peers for supposedly being gay. This led straights and gays alike to assert that the legalization of gay marriage would remove the stigma of being gay by conferring normality upon queer/queer-identified teens. Gay marriage would supposedly prevent such tragic moments. But if we follow this idea to its logical end, it becomes apparent that what appears to be a wish to bestow

dignity upon queers is in fact deeply rooted in a fear and loathing of the unmarried, and a neoliberal belief that the addition of private rights tied to the state's munificence will end all social problems.

In a December 2009 blog for *The Nation* titled "On the New York Senate Marriage Equality Vote," Melissa Harris-Lacewell wrote about the extreme harassment suffered by her lesbian niece at her school, which eventually led to her transferring out. Bizarrely, Harris-Lacewell connected the lack of "marriage equality" to her niece's troubles: "Each time we refuse to recognize LGBT persons as first class citizens, deserving of all the rights and protections of the state, we make the world more harsh, more dangerous, and more difficult for my niece and for all gay and transgender young people. They deserve better." On the way to this strange formulation, she conceded that "marriage equality" will not solve the systemic problems of violence and institutional discrimination, but on this she was firm: "marriage equality" would make life better and easier for LGBTs. What is so puzzling is that Harris-Lacewell is purportedly on the left and writes for a magazine whose leftist credentials are well established.

Yet, surely, if a teen is unhappy or commits suicide because he/she is gay and cannot bear to live in a homophobic world, or because he/she is relentlessly taunted by peers for looking/acting gay, surely the problem, the very great problem, lies in the shocking cruelty of a world that will not tolerate any deviation from the norm. When we decide that the solution to such cruelty is to ensure that queer/queer-seeming teens should appear normal via gay marriage, are we not explicitly condoning and even creating a world where discrimination is acceptable? Are we not explicitly telling queer teens and adults that non-conformity can and should lead to death?

WHOSE EQUALITY? AT WHAT COST?

Such convoluted pieces of logic overdetermine today's relentless quest for gay marriage, a quest that is portrayed in terms of an attainment of "full citizenship" (begging the question: who has half citizenship, exactly?) and in terms of "full equality." But who gains "equality" under these circumstances? And at what cost? One of the biggest arguments

for gay marriage is that it would allow gays and lesbians to access the over one thousand benefits that straight married people can access. Well-known feminists like Gloria Steinem give their stamp of approval to gay marriage with the rationale that “we” (feminists) have changed marriage for the better. Yet, while it may be true that women can no longer be raped with impunity by their husbands, the basic nature of marriage is unchanged: it remains the neoliberal state’s most efficient way to corral the family as a source of revenue, and to place upon it the ultimate responsibility for guaranteeing basic benefits like health care. Furthermore, if millions of people are excluded from the 1,000+ benefits simply because they are NOT married, surely it does not matter that “we” have changed the institution when we now choose to ignore the inequalities perpetuated by marriage? Surely we ought not to be for a society where basic benefits like health care are only granted to those who get married? Surely the point is not to change an archaic institution but to change, you know, the world?

The history of gay marriage is now used to overwrite all of queer history as if the gay entrance into that institution were a leap into modernity, as if marriage is all that queers have ever aspired to, as if everything we have wrought and seen and known were all towards this one goal. Americans are fond of judging modernity in the Islamic world by the extent to which women there are allowed to toss away their veils. In the U.S. landscape of “gay rights,” marriage is the veil: the last barrier between gays and lesbians and “full citizenship.” Opening it up to them is considered the last sign of gay modernity, still to be attained. Liberals and lefties alike, straight and gay, look at gay marriage in countries like Spain and Argentina as the ultimate mark of civilization. They note approvingly that South Africa guarantees a constitutional right to gay marriage, but they have nothing to say about the fact that the same country has over five-million people living with HIV and no similar guarantee for health care.

Gay marriage is seen as the core of a new kind of privatized and personal endeavor—the rights of LGBT *individuals* to enter into a private contract. This ignores the fact that the U.S. is the only major industrialized nation to tie so many basic benefits like health care to marriage. Gay marriage advocates are fond of pointing to Norway or Canada as

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prime examples of countries where gay marriage is legal, as examples to emulate. They ignore one basic fact: in all these countries, citizens were guaranteed rights like health care long before they legislated marriage. Simply put: in Canada, getting divorced does not put you at risk of losing your health care and dying from a treatable condition. I am not suggesting Canada's public health program is perfect and not under constant threat from the conservative Harper regime, but the fact is that health care is not a basic right in the United States. Tiny differences, but extreme consequences.

Over the same period of years that the gay marriage fight has gathered steam, roughly two and a half decades, the U.S. has also slid into an increasingly fragile economic state. Over 45 million Americans are uninsured (the new health care "reform" is likely to prove too onerous for most). On the queer front, we have seen an increase in the policing, surveillance, and arrests in cases of public displays of sexuality, made especially resonant in the recent case of DeFarra Gaymon, who was shot to death by the police in a park in Newark, supposedly during an undercover sting operation and while supposedly engaging in public sex. HIV/AIDS rates are not only rising, those infected with the virus are now among the newly criminalized. A dearth of funds is causing the closure of resources and safe spaces for queer homeless youth.

This section of the anthology is impelled by the failure of both the gay rights movement and the so-called left to address the nightmare of neoliberalism that faces us today. We see this as the moment to move beyond the idea that marriage could ever be part of a radical vision for change. The essays in this section, by writers, activists, and academics on the left, highlight the harmful role of marriage in a neoliberal state that emphasizes issues of identity and the family in order to deflect attention away from the attrition of social services and benefits. Focusing on the family as the arbiter of benefits also ignores the fact that the exclusion of queer people from the normative family structure is marked by physical and psychological violence. When queers criticize the State's emphasis on the normative family, we do so because we know only too well the violence of exclusion and because, for many of us, our identities as queer people have been marked and shaped, not always in unproductive ways, by that violence.

In short, the family is the best way to advance capitalism, as the base unit through which capitalism distributes benefits. Through our reliance on the marital family structure, emphasized and valorized by the push for gay marriage, we allow the state to mandate that only some relationships and some forms of social networks count. If you are married, you get health care. If you are not, go and die on your sad and lonely deathbed by yourself; even the state will not take care of you. If you are married, you get to be the good immigrant and bring over your immediate and extended family to set up a family business and send your children to the best schools after years of perseverance and hard work (at least theoretically). If you are not, you can be deported and imprisoned at the slightest infraction and not one of the kinship networks that you are a part of will count in the eyes of the state. In other words, a queer radical critique of the family is not simply the celebration of an outsider status, although it is often that, but an economic critique. A queer radical critique of gay marriage exposes how capitalism structures our notion of “family” and the privatization of the social relationships we depend on to survive.

In a neoliberal economy, gay identity becomes a way to further capitalist exploitation. In an essay titled “Professional Homosexuals,” Katherine Sender writes about gays and lesbians in a high-tech firm trying for years to form a gay and lesbian employee group; such groups were banned for fear they would “function as trade unions.” Eventually, the firm allowed such a group to form; it was concerned with the “recruitment ... and productivity of gay and lesbian employees.” None of which had to do with them as workers. The point is this: today, capitalism does not seek to exclude gays and lesbians—instead, it seeks to integrate them into its structure of exploitation as long as they don’t upset the status quo.

This section of the anthology insists that we stop looking for “equality” in the narrow terms dictated by neoliberalism, where progress means an endless replication of the status quo. It insists that we stop acquiescing to the neoliberal demand that our identities should dictate what basic rights are given to us. *Against Equality* is unapologetic and even, at times, angry. We are not only putting gay marriage advocates on notice, but their “straight allies” as well. In the course of our work,

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over the last many years, our critics have often accused us of having no “solutions.” Our response, then and now, is that the critique, one that has often been silenced or made invisible, is a necessary part of the process of finding solutions that erase the economic inequality that surrounds us all. Our work is not intended to be prescriptive—unlike marriage, we do not guarantee eternal happiness of the married kind—but to agitate for a much needed dialogue on these matters. Our point, as will be evident from the essays that follow, is that the idea of marriage as any kind of solution for our problems perpetuates the very inequalities that gay marriage advocates claim to resolve.