

## ***Gay Men and the Left in Post-War Britain: How the Personal got Political***

Lucy Robinson. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.

*Reviewed by Paul Reynolds*

The left – particularly the Marxist oriented radical left – have had an uneasy and sometimes antagonistic relationship with sexual politics. Simon Edge (1995) typified a common position at the height of LGB activism when he observed:

....the Marxist tradition has no more influence on the modern lesbian and gay movement than it deserves. Gay Marxists who are encouraged by their straight comrades and leaders to shun the very real gains won since the GLF [Gay Liberation Front] by an autonomous lesbian and gay movement are being seduced into an essentially heterosexist project where gay issues are sidelined. (Edge, 1995, p. 3–4)

The resurgence of Marxist scholarship – both theoretically oriented and more overtly political – in the area of sex and sexuality suggests that if this observation had some credence for the past, it does not today (indicatively Dee 2010, Kirsch 2000, Reynolds 2003, Floyd 2010, Wolf 2009). Likewise, the modern reformist left – from movement politics through to Labourism and Parliamentary leftism – has long identified itself with progressive identity politics, to varying degrees through politics of recognition and redistribution (indicatively Adam, Duyvendak and Krouwel 1999, Brooke 2011, Dunphy 2000, Engel 2001, Richardson and Munro 2012). It is important, however, to clarify what the relationship between the radical left and the politics of identity formations have been throughout the 20th century – whether in respect of sexuality or gender, ethnicity or disability. What is at stake is the need to clarify and extend the complex relationship between class based analyses, socialist politics and identity claims to avoid the easy dichotomisation typified in post-modern critiques, which has created a fault line within collectivist politics. The politic of the present always starts with an understanding of the politics of the past. How accurate is it to regard the radical left as hostile or indifferent to issues of sex and sexuality?

Lucy Robinson has performed a service in this regard in providing a rich, thoughtful and careful historical study of gay men and the left in post-war Britain. To be clear this does not have an explicit argument about the relationship between class, socialist and sexual politics. What it does, rather, is weave a picture of the intersections of socialist and sexual thinkers, with a focus on gay men – though not exclusively so – and hybrid or conjoined sexual and socialist organisation and campaigns. By focusing on groups, organisations and individuals, Robinson brings to

life a vibrant history where the nuances of gay and sexual politics with left politics is lived rather than theorised. Because lives and struggles are portrayed, the terms of political engagement are put in context, and Robinson is judicious in her judgements as to successes and failures, weaknesses and strengths.

Robinson provides a wide ranging but in-depth exploration of the intersection of the left in broad terms and sexuality politics through a survey of the period between 1945 and the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, enlivened by portraits of key voices during the period that ‘humanises’ the narrative in a way Weeks (2007 & Reynolds and Weeks 2013) encourages in his assessment of sexual politics over much the same period. The narrative provides a measured commentary of the nature of post-war legal reform, with its emphasis on (grudging) tolerance, and the slow movement from a modest and limited, incremental development of local lesbian and gay activism within municipal – and particularly municipal socialist – contexts to the renewed and openly political responses to Thatcherism in the 1980’s. The commentary is interspersed with biographical sketches that demonstrate the nuances of the different voices that were significant to this politics. Some, like Anthony Grey, are still relatively well known, in Grey’s case for his initial work with the homosexual law reform. Robinson skilfully identifies the shortcomings of the ‘minority rights model’ that was propagated by those who sought decriminalisation prior to 1967, with an understanding that each protagonist, regardless as to whether posterity sees them as too limited in their vision, lived a more complex and nuanced life than broad political analyses sometimes suggests. The brief portrait of Grey, for example, puts him in a context between those who saw him – as often seen now – as apologist, and those who recognise his prodigious efforts were largely in hostile contexts with limited room for meaningful agency. Too often people are condemned in theory without adequate appreciation of context and conjuncture.

In the course of this history, a rich and fascinating picture of social change, sexual change and the changing politics of sexuality is delivered with clarity and readability. The complexities of political questions are laid bare to produce a detailed but not dry account of the development of Gay left politics in post-war Britain. Such an approach means that the narrative is not tightly chronological nor always detailed as to every major point of struggle, but that is an acceptable trade off (when that work is done well elsewhere). Robinson captures the first, tentative politics of the 1950’s and the ‘outsiders’ who pursued it, the development of middle class radicalism in the 1960’s and the subsequent development of activism within party structures but more importantly in movement groups and around community activism from the 1970’s and thus provides a mapping for the particularity of the British case.

It seems almost churlish to offer critical comments, since the text is both engrossing and informative as a read and makes the addition that it claims to our understandings of change and politics in this specific period. There are, however, two minor reservations. The conclusion becomes a brief essay on the terrain since 2000 that actually pushes out what would have been a far more welcome reflection on the body of the book, and that impressionistic outline of 21<sup>st</sup> Century politics might have been more explicitly contrasted or related to past struggles. Again, in an introduction clear about the limitations of the text and what it is seeking to do, there might have been a signposting of themes, continuities and changes to providing an overarching steer

to what follows. Given the central claim is a greater sense of forgotten communality between those who fought for sexual rights and those who fought for socialism, a thematic elaboration of the nature of those communalities and their scope and limits would have been welcome. This should not be seen to detract from an insightful – and thoroughly enjoyable – read.

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