

Homophobia in the Name of Marxism

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SEXUALITY is a relatively modern concept, emerging in 1800 and 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' were not recognised as sexual categories till the end of the 19th century [Katz 1990]. It is significant to note that these terms came to be coined in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny in the context of anti-sodomy legislation in Germany. Sexologists sought to distinguish between the sodomite as a 'temporary aberration' and the homosexual as a separate species, bearing a distinctive sexuality [Foucault 1979]. After Foucault's institutional deconstruction of the history of sexuality, the 19th century epistemology of perversion has become suspect. It may be underlined that ever since there has been a struggle over the meaning of homosexuality. Since heterosexuality has been assumed, its origins and vicissitudes have not been described. Definite biological assumptions have been made about heterosexuality being 'innate' or natural and thus rather than recognising the continuities and commonalities among sexualities, the entire focus has been on treating 'deviant sexualities' as problematic.

H Srikanth's response [Srikanth 1996] to Vimal Balasubrahmanyam's article 'Gay Rights in India' [Balasubrahmanyam 1996] is one more piece in a mainstream homophobic tradition. The concept of 'homophobia' attributed to George Weinberg (1972) underlines a significant idea that it is not homosexuality which is a problem but society's reaction to it. These reactions, to a large extent, emerge from the threat that homosexuality poses to the taken-for-granted values relating to family life and from common misconceptions about homosexuality which is viewed as an illness that can be cured and it not cured would lead to the dying out of the human race.

H Srikanth begins by arguing within an Engelian framework, proposing that forms of sexual relations changed with changes in the structure of social production. Though he is not too sure of the existence of 'homosexuals' in primitive clan societies, he reaches conclusions which fix homosexuality as 'archaic', 'decadent', 'more psychic than physiological' and emerging out of 'denial of healthy heterosexual relations'. To put it briefly, he views homosexuals as products of incomplete or faulty socialisation or as having a problem that could be set right by 'therapy' and 'education', only if they had the determination.

Engels' thesis in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State* (1884), which establishes linkages between the system of production, kinship organisation and political institution, is well known and influential in Marxist and feminist analysis. Engels' thesis has been critiqued on the grounds of reliability of ethnographic data [Gough 1972; Leacock 1972; Brown 1970] and for its essentialist assumptions [Coward 1983; Vogel 1972]. Engels assumes a 'natural' division of labour and a 'natural' abomination of promiscuity by women. It has been argued that these essentialist assumptions which underlie what is actually a theory of the social construction of gender relations are serious flaws [Moore 1988]. In the Engelian framework monogamy has nothing to do with love or affection but is a means to protect and concentrate wealth. Bourgeois society requires heterosexual, individual love in order to maintain and reproduce property relations. Engels distinguishes between 'sex love' of the 19th century and 'simple sexual desire'. Not only does Engels assume the premise of sexual desire being heterosexual but also assumes the gift of female sexuality to men and the 'naturalness' of male desire for women [Evans 1987]. The assumption that heterosexuality is normal is related to its functions as a condition of existence of reproduction [Chodorow 1978; Gimenez 1980]. Gimenez (1980) argues that heterosexuality becomes a norm precisely because it secures reproduction in a pre-industrial society where stability of population required that birth rates be high. If we go along with Engels' thesis then it follows that sexual division of labour originated in the sexual act and therefore the institution of heterosexuality is at least as responsible for women's oppression as is the institution of private property.

In fact, what is required is not a mechanical application of the Engelian thesis but rather to use the framework critically as a useful counter to rightwing idealisation of the bourgeois family as essentially constant and eternal. Homosexuality is not being 'provided as a solution' (as Srikanth assumes); nevertheless gay and lesbian interventions have had significant directions for possible reorganisation of heterosexuality. Heterosexuality as a political problematic cannot be dismissed. The problem with Srikanth's methodological position is that he denies functionalism while being functionalist and stresses the importance of the historical

perspective while making dramatic and general statements. A careful and detailed analysis stressing the uniqueness of historical conjunctures of the interactions between key structures of production, reproduction and sexuality is what is needed. Such historical analyses of homosexuality are being developed by South Asian Gays and Lesbians (see Rathi 1993 and the Report of the Nar Project, Seminar on History of Alternate Sexualities in South Asia, 1993).

Homosexuality is more to do with one's psyche rather than physiology in cases other than those of hermaphrodites is a conclusion that Srikanth draws without furnishing any 'rational' or 'natural' basis for his arguments. He accepts uncritically the dualism built in the conceptualisation of science; the Cartesian legacy of a sharp split between the body and the mind. By this logic homosexuality does not 'really' exist, i.e., to say it can be overcome, when it is only in the mind. Such a split is myopic about the complex interactions between body, culture and society. However, Srikanth grants that there is a physiological basis to homosexuality in case of hermaphrodites, thereby once again overlooking the fact that body or physiology is a potentiality which is elaborated by culture and developed in social relations [Turner 1992]. A serious sociology of the body and sexuality demands that 'desire' be socially and historically located. Desire has been viewed as vain/luxury (not needed by society). But the distinction between needs and desires is also a value judgment. For instance, in the medieval period theologians condemned husbands who sought pleasure in the bodies of their wives; theologians today condemn men who love men or women who identify with women. What is regarded as need is bound up with the dominant expectations of normality. Dominant religious, biological and social imperatives have all been used to explain and regulate sexual matters. It is within such a context that Balasubrahmanyam points to the culture, heritage and religion in India giving sanction to homosexuality, thereby contesting the popular cultural imperative that homosexuality is alien to Indian culture.

The pathology approach to gays and lesbians that Srikanth argues for was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Several reviews of this approach have demonstrated their often questionable validity and underlying prejudices. Recent research in psychology has pointed to the paucity of psychological understanding of heterosexuality and the problematic polarisation of normal and abnormal sexualities [Chodorow 1994]. Chodorow demonstrates the multiplicity of

both homosexual and heterosexual desires and argues that clinically there is no normal heterosexuality. Review of developmental and clinical accounts of heterosexuality have revealed that there are no persuasive grounds for distinguishing heterosexuality from homosexuality on criteria of 'maturity', 'neurosis' or 'normality'. "Both are similarly constituted and experienced compromise formations" [Chodorow 1994]. A person's sexual identity is a combination of his or her gender identity, gender role behaviour and sexual orientation [Hawkins 1980]. This sexual orientation is a continuum varying from exclusive homoerotic through ambisexual bisexual to exclusive heterosexual. Hence treatment/therapy to change sexual orientation which was based on the 'illness model' of homosexuality has been proven to be limited and has been replaced by group therapy approach to facilitate the 'coming out' of homosexual identities. Ever since homosexuals became 'gays' by rejecting the notion of their being sick and sinful, 'the gay identity' as a political identity has become distinct from the phenomenon of same-sex behavior (for instance, same sex behaviour in prisons or barracks). Gay and lesbian studies have given accounts of homosexuality that vary from the essentialist to the social constructionist. But the fact remains that there is no evidence about the causes of homosexuality just like the causes of heterosexuality are unknown.

Gay identity as a political identity emerged in the 1970s as a result of increasing police harassment and a weakening of taboos against discussing homosexuality [D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988]. The civil rights movements, the anti-war movements and women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s saw participation by gays and lesbians [Cruikshank 1992]; sexual practices thought of as 'private matters' became politicised by the women's and gay and lesbian movements. Gays and lesbians were not claiming limited rights to perform certain sexual acts but the issue at stake was of their sexual identities as minority identity which was condemned by the dominant heterosexual majority. Several gay liberation organisations that emerged during this period, the GLF for instance, were New Left groups which stood for coalition with other progressive groups. Marxism exerted a strong influence on the movement, it was argued that sexual freedom required structural changes and not just changes in laws [D'Emilio 1983]. Academic Marxists like Weeks (1980) presented homosexuality as a challenge to capitalism, since they saw a functional fit between the needs of capital and the organisation of sexuality. The monolithic view of gays and lesbians as belonging to the privileged sections of (white/upper class) society has been more than challenged by the powerful

anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* [Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981]. Working class lesbians have been in the forefront of lesbian feminism and Pat Parker or Rita Mae Brown are cases in point. The agenda of South Asian gays and lesbian organisations has always highlighted the need to challenge classism, racism, sexism and homophobia [Rathi 1993]. Srikanth is completely mistaken, therefore, in reading the gay movement as a movement for recognition of freedom of sex. As Foucault (1983) puts it, the political goals of the homosexual movement concern the question of freedom of sexual choice over freedom of the sexual act. The total liberty of sexual actions is not the objective, the liberty of expression of choice is important.

Lastly, to answer Srikanth's question as to why civil liberties organisations should back gay and lesbian movements. Simply because gays and lesbians as a minority group are being discriminated against; section 377 of the IPC gives the police authority to assault and harass gays. Gay bashing is a regular occurrence. This goes against the Right to Privacy in Article 17 of the Human Rights Covenants. Sexual orientation must be added to civil rights laws; there must be no discrimination because of one's sexual orientation. Section 377 must be repealed: "If heterosexual intercourse between unmarried people is not proscribed, how such a right does not extend to homosexual intercourse? If homosexual sex is thought depraved because of its non-reproductive consequences then masturbation, celibacy ... must all be similarly proscribed. Can a distinction between heterosexual and homosexual forms of sexual activity be defended rationally?" [Aids Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan 1991]. Creative Marxists would answer this question in the negative. For as Menzel puts it, it is above all Marxists (and feminists) who should be developing a new culture of sexuality and a different morality [Menzel 1982].

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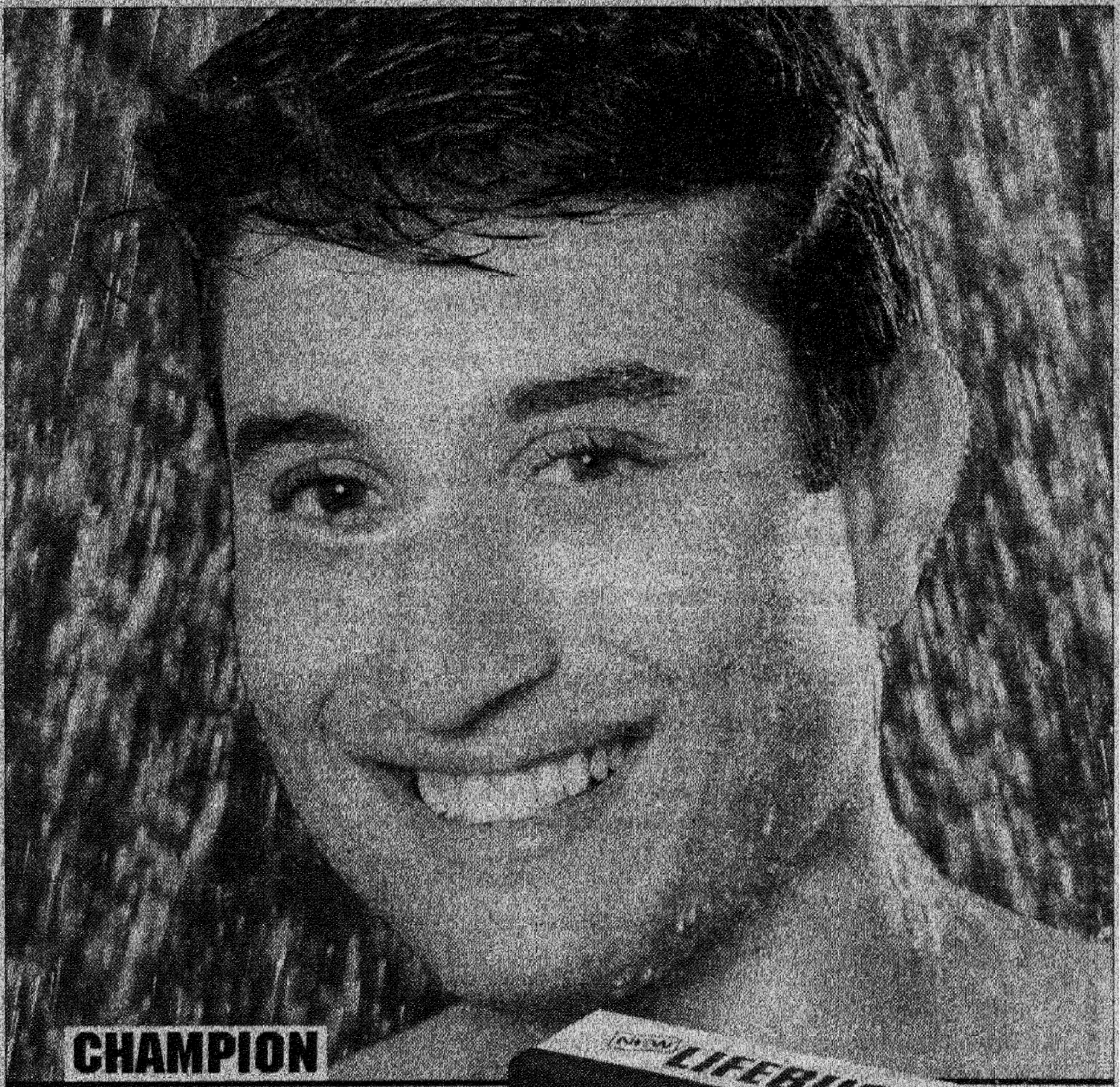
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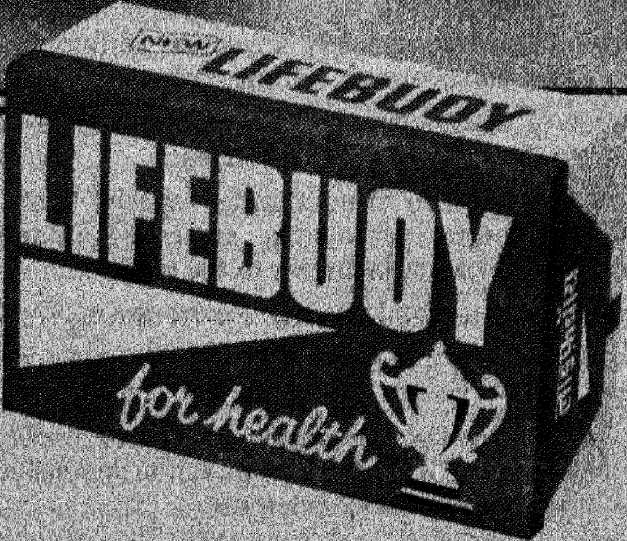
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