

Queer Feminism: United by Difference

by Tina Phillips

Lesbians and other queer people have played a central and integral role within the feminist movement. This has not always been recognized, nor have queer folks' contributions been appreciated. Queer people have been invisible to many. However, as socialist feminists we believe in the intersection of identities and of oppression. There are multiple layers of oppression that intersect along identity lines. Long have we seen the impact that capitalism has on minorities. Yet, queer folks are undervalued even among some socialist feminists. Some believe that class is the only factor socialists should organize around. Many disregard identity as a factor; but it remains an important part of who we are and a central focus of the onslaught against all people.

In the past, lesbians were unwelcome in the feminist movement. They were told that their sexual orientation had nothing to do with the goals of feminism, and that being open about their queer identity would harm the movement and be a "distraction." Some lesbians continued to openly organize within the movement but were often treated as pariahs; attempts were made to silence them. While lesbians are included in the modern day mainstream feminist movement, their needs are often ignored.

Within socialist feminist circles, queer issues are considered backburner issues to more pressing issues. However, queer women have been central to many movements and organizations, even though their queerness is not usually a focus.

The good thing about socialist feminism is it focuses on inclusion. Socialist feminists recognize the fluidity of gender, sexuality, and the complexity of human beings. We also see that there is worth and value in feelings and personal experiences as well as rationale and logic. We value that the personal is political; and we see the connections between the everyday struggle of queer people and that of other marginalized groups. Many socialist feminists recognize that identity matters.

Capitalism uses any perceived difference in identity and labels it as a weakness. Capitalism uses difference to exploit and oppress the "other." The recognition of these exploitations unites us all in a common struggle for social and economic justice. Furthermore, as much as patriarchy impacts both women and men, queer people are further impacted and threatened by its constricting, limiting, and controlling ways. I believe the destiny of all people is bound up in the liberation of queer people.

While some feel feminism or queer culture has little to do with socialism, others have a critical and radical critique that combines feminism, queer theory, and a socialist perspective. Third-



wave feminism includes queered feminism. Third-wave feminism includes the rejection of gender essentialism and the gender binary, makes queer theory central in its analysis, and is sex-positive. Although there are some biological aspects of gender, much of it is socially constructed -- which means it can be deconstructed. It is the aim of many socialist feminists to deconstruct gender and highlight and expand the ability of all human beings to experience all life has to offer (feminine, masculine, and everywhere in-between).

As socialist feminists, we need to examine and dissect gender, patriarchy, sexism, strict gender roles, misogyny, and male chauvinism, among other barriers, to achieve full liberation for all people. We believe the capitalist and patriarchal systems benefit from and perpetuate the social constructions of gender, which bind us and control us. In addition, we believe that socialist feminism can be practiced in our everyday lives through engaging in feminist process and consciously creating socialist feminism as well as within the workplace and our organizations. This can look different ways to different people, and there are also various different kinds of feminists too. So it is very complex. However, I encourage people to look up these terms, ideas, and concepts through books and online as well as asking feminist people what they mean to them. Individuals must take initiative to learn about feminist concepts themselves as they recognize the importance of doing so.

Most importantly, as socialist feminists we believe systemic, institutional, and structural changes must be made through reforms and revolutionary means so that a socialist feminist so-

ciety can be realized. This is what divides us from the mainstream "liberal" feminist movement. The liberal feminist movement believes that reforms are the tools we need to employ to help women compete in a capitalist society, and does not encourage revolutionary means or ideas to transcend gender constructs, redefine gender, or create a truly egalitarian, non-hierarchical society.

Another aspect I believe is important to a queer critique of feminism is that feminism cannot be realized without the participation of all people of all genders and all sexes. For many, feminism is something for, of, and by women. This excludes transwomen, transmen, men, gender queer individuals. In the first wave of feminism, lesbians were excluded, and in the current wave of feminism, many are excluding transwomen, transmen, and queer people who do not fit the gender binary. Many feminists also exclude anyone who self-identifies as a man. I see this as a barrier to progress.

I believe minorities need allies and allies need minorities. This is how unity is achieved -- and how solidarity is formed. Partnership and collaboration is necessary for us to build the society we need and will thrive in together. When patriarchal structures, socially constructed and strict gender roles, and the power dynamic integrated into these structures, are dismantled and abolished, it will directly benefit everyone. Whereas some believe men benefit from a patriarchal capitalist society, socialist feminists know that men suffer much more than they gain from capitalism and patriarchy.

Socialist feminist queers advocate for a non-hierarchical egalitarian society that is free from homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, internalized forms of the later, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. We call on all people to be united in class struggle to realize a classless socialist feminist society.

Marriage equality is a modern day example of the clash between class and sexuality. Within the queer community a lot of energy, money, and activism has been directed at winning marriage equality. Although I see marriage equality as an important civil and human right, there are more fundamentally important and immediate issues the LGBT community must focus upon. These include: homophobia, bullying, hate crimes, murders and rapes, homelessness, sexually transmitted infections, alcoholism and substance abuse, sexual exploitation, discrimination in housing and employment, and heteropatriarchy. Not to mention mental illness, which disproportionately impacts the LGBT community due to the factors above. These are pressing concerns that are all too often ignored and under-funded by government, non-profits, and even grassroots organizations and individual activists.

Additionally, there is an argument that marriage equality further privileges Euro-American

men. Those who argue this think that marriage rights for lesbians and other queer people would not make much of a difference to the quality of our lives, given the opposition and adversity we face in society at large. To me, all people deserve the protections and benefits of marriage, regardless if they are in a relationship, are single, or have a different family arrangement (such as three people). Personally, I see marriage equality as a steppingstone to greater rights for everyone, although I acknowledge not everyone even within the queer community agrees on this. To me this is not an either/or issue. We need to organize and fight for a better quality of life for all queer people on every front and take every opportunity to do so.

We must remember that, for many people, marriage is about deep emotions, love, and other intangible complexities that cannot be simply brushed aside. As socialists, we recognize that human needs are critical, and, thus, I believe there is room at the table for all human needs to be addressed. The U.S. Supreme Court may very well decide this issue soon. In the meantime and after marriage equality is won, we have to recommit ourselves to fighting for justice for queer people of every stripe who may be facing life and death struggles along class lines. This will require class analysis and socialist organizing.

Socialist feminism is a great equalizer. We clearly see the intersection of all types of oppression and the disproportionate impact on queer people of color, the disabled, mothers and fathers, fat queer folks, youth, seniors and other marginalized peoples. Any form of "difference" adds to the chance of further strife and marginalization. However, we should also remember that our lives and differences are worth celebrating. We are all worthy of living amazing lives, and we can all realize our own potential for happiness. Part of that realization takes work. We must unify our approach to ending oppression on every level, both by organizing inside self-identified groups and by working together as human beings.

Moving forward, having our own identity groups (such as the Women's Commission or Queer Commission) is not enough; we need entire organizations, such as the SPUSA and all segments of our society (not just feminists or queer people) to find common reasons to band together, for our destiny is inextricably tied together. We need each other if we are going to overcome capitalism and heteropatriarchy, which impacts us all. There is hope for a different world, filled with acceptance and appreciation of differences. But this will only happen if we recognize our common vision that links us all together now. It will only happen if we start working together to actualize that vision and take action, and not despite our diverse individual identities — but because of them. We are united by difference.