The Queer Encampment at Occupy Baltimore

BY COREY REIDY
Guest contributor from BALTIMORE INDEPENDENT READER

While there was a pronounced discussion, within activist circles, about the Occupy Wall Street movement, it was not at the forefront of public awareness until after several incidents involving police violence and mass arrests. Quickly, Occupy Everywhere jumped from a social media phenomenon into actualization in cities and towns across the globe. Occupy Everywhere is both a stance in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street, and a way of organizing around the local; bringing the movement home.

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Sex & the Economic Crisis

BY ROGER GREEN

Is there anything to say about the sexual politics of the current economic crash? At least one notable economist thinks there is. The following is an interview with a former Wall Street insider who’s well connected in policy circles, thinks Occupy Wall Street is a hopeful sign, and is gay. Currently he teaches at a well-known university, but prefers here to stay anonymous. We’ll call him “Mr. X”.

RG: The history of leftist political opposition is in the first place the history of people fighting for economic justice. Ever since the rise of identity movements of the 1960s, there’s always been a leftist critique that says, say, feminism or the gay movement doesn’t have its eye on the prize. On this view, we have to focus on basic material questions of fairness. Other problems will either take care of themselves or are secondary. But of course in the '70s, identity movements became the center of gravity of what liberation meant to most people in the West. The old left was eclipsed, tarnished as it was by the failures of Russia and China. The gay movement deals occasionally with economic questions, but in ways that don’t threaten the system — looking for corporate recognition of LGBT employee groups or same-sex partners. Where the gay movement could have been voice for, say, universal healthcare, instead it blocked what could have been a larger coalition with people who are suffering in this economy. Why should access to medicine or a pension depend on marital status? So in the midst of this economic crisis, is the old leftist suspicion of identity politics vindicated?

X: Yes, I think so. There’s a basic question now: Are we confronting a final crisis of capitalism in this current financial crisis? Or is this simply the latest in a series of collapsed bubbles to which unregulated capitalism gives rise? Is this a final crisis in the sense that one more time we’re seeing a politically unsustainable concentration of economic power in the hands of the wealthiest part of society?

In the 1880s and 1930s, financial crises that similarly involved concentration of wealth and impoverishment of large numbers of people gave rise, respectively, to the Progressive era and the New Deal. The failures of Russia and China, and the failures of the Cold War, have changed the political landscape.

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LGBT Rights Icon
Frank Kameny Dies at 86

BY STEVE CHARING

It is fitting that when Frank Kameny eventually passed on it would occur on National Coming Out Day. Dubbed the “Father of the Gay Rights Movement,” Kameny, often blunt in his manner, was a pioneering activist whose tireless and aggressive efforts over the course of six decades helped advance the rights of LGBT citizens all over the U.S. The man who coined the phrase “Gay is Good” was found dead of natural causes in his Washington D.C. apartment on October 11.

Franklin Edward Kameny was born on May 21, 1925 in New York City. He became a World War II combat veteran in Europe. “They asked and I lied and didn’t tell” in 1943 to get into the service, “though as a healthy teenager I can tell you that I had things to tell,” he said.

He attended Queens College (NY) where he received his B.S. in Physics in 1948. Kameny then earned a Masters and PhD in astronomy from Harvard University in 1949 and 1956, respectively.

Kameny went on to work as a civilian for the Army Map service as an astronomer. When the Army found out he was homosexual, he was fired in 1957 although they never cited any evidence. At the time, gays were prohibited from federal employment as a result of President Eisenhower’s 1953 executive order denying security clearances to “people who engaged in sexual perversion.”

But Kameny stood up for himself. He appealed to the White House, the Civil Service Commiss-

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The destruction of traditional masculinity has been taken in stride by the upper-middle class, but has been enormously destructive in the working classes. The genius of the Murdoch empire has been to take this simmering rage and turn it into political power, and they found it either in the working class, or else they went abroad. Today you look at gay couples and they could be brothers or sisters. They come from the same kind of social background. It’s a partnership within the social class rather than marrying outside, and it becomes very solipsistic.

RG: But wait, wasn’t Boy Scouts more about grooming cannon fodder for the British Empire than helping youth advance economically?

X: Oh, there’s no question but that Baden-Powell did not see himself as any kind of subversive; to the contrary, he thought he was assisting the British imperialist project. The kind of sublimated pederasty that underlay the Boy Scouts and such similar movements as the YMCA and the popularity of Horatio Alger novels was helpful to power structures of the time and thus allowed to flourish, provided it was not too explicit. That’s one reason the trial of Oscar Wilde was such a disaster, because it forced out into the open what power holders “knew” was going on but tolerated provided it wasn’t rubbed into the faces of the working class.

The point, I think, is that the co-opting of the male group via officially favored pederastic institutions formed the power-holders’ reaction to the emergence of an urban working class with the Industrial Revolution. Today, the reaction to the Information Revolution is the suppression of the male group, except in the highest circles of power – Wall Street, the executive suites of major companies, the Pentagon.

RG: Economics and sex are bound up in interesting ways. Going back to the beginning, social life depends on a division of labor that in the first place is sexual. Or to take a recent example, income in the West has been stagnant since the early 1970s but that was papered over by the flooding of workforce of women, which kept the US family afloat. And when that ran out of steam, the consumer-credit booms were one response engineered by Washington...
and Wall Street to cover up that decline in income. The mortgage-debt fueled housing bubble was the next chapter, leading directly to the 2008 crash. Are there other aspects to this crisis that suggest underlying sexual dynamics?

X: If you look at the traditional composition of what I'm calling the clerisy, which you can expand to include warrior classes, they were cemented in many cases by homoerotic bonds. Priests and warriors in the traditional sense have been replaced almost entirely by modern clerical workers. Cutting-edge warfighting in the US means sitting alone at a desk in Tampa and operating a drone with what looks like a video game. The traditional masculine virtues are not only not needed but positively antithetical. The feminization of the clerisy, the incorporation of upper-middle class women and socialized gays, is an obvious response to changes in the economy, changes in the work that needs to be done, the technology by which it's accomplished.

But there's a crucial exception to this at the heart of the West's economic system. Wall Street is one of the few places left where the interest of the clients came before personal interest or even that of the firm. This attracted a certain type of individual – a well-heeled, white-shoe type of person. And it was a milieu in which gays and women, it turned out, fit in very well. If you go on to a trading floor, however, what you see is testosterone-fueled behavior. What happened beginning late in the 1980s is that the traders took over investment banking. You can follow the transformation in Michael Lewis's writing, beginning with his account in Liar's Poker – his first book – of what it was like to be a young new hire on the trading floor of Solomon Brothers in the 1980s. Contrast his predecessors someone like Lloyd Blankfein, head of Goldman Sachs, who grew out of a working-class environment and who fuels himself and the people around him on testosterone. So this is one area where traditional masculine virtues still apply. But because they were unregulated and allowed to run amok, traders directly precipitated the financial crisis.

RG: As the male group fades away in the West, what's interesting is that feral forms – Mexican drug gangs to Al Qaeda – crop up and nip like wolves at the borders of the American empire. But here you're saying it was a feral, ruthless male group at the core of the financial system that brought on the economic crisis?

X: A sort of 'civilized' masculinity that was a product of the old Ivy League and prep schools has almost disappeared on Wall Street, so you have either the club-wielding masculinity that you see on the trading floors or a feminized, updated version of the old civilized masculinity in those areas of banking that have lost power on Wall Street – the areas that were client-focussed.

The underlying fact is the increasing dependence of capitalist governments to sustain demand on deliberate creation of asset bubbles – the late '90s tech stock bubble, the early 2000s real estate bubble – in order to maintain demand. And trading is an essential part of fostering bubbles. So what you see is the economic, cultural, and political trends moving in the same direction.

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Federal Reserve chief Ben Bernanke has been literally trying to spark new asset bubbles in the wake of 2008. The Japanese have been trying to spark asset bubbles since the early '90s, as successor to the largest asset bubble in history: the Japanese bubble of the late '80s. And they've all failed.

The possibility of an old-style Keynesian stimulus – government spending to boost demand – has been politically blocked in the US by the Republicans and in Europe by Germany. And if the Republicans succeed in capturing control of all major organs of government, which looks entirely probable, the solutions that they talk about – cutting spending and taxes – are so laughable so as to be not even worth considering in serious economic terms.

But the Republicans will be confronted with the same kind of choice that Germany confronted in the early 1930s: How do you revive the economy? And the answer of course – in order to prevent political meltdown – is a turn toward militarism. You have large numbers of enraged angry, economically and politically and culturally insecure males, and you put them to “work” in a militarized environment.

I see a Republican government turning to that because it’s the only solution to economic meltdown that is consistent with their political goal of destroying the legacies of the New Deal and the Great Society.

RG: Thomas Frank in What’s the Matter with Kansas argues of the coalition between the Republican billionaires and the working class is cemented by exploitation of sexually charged issues – abortion, gay marriage. You can argue that in this regard Fox TV’s Rupert Murdoch is the defining figure of our age.

X: He’s an utterly evil genius, though he took advantage of a situation that had already been created.

The destruction of traditional masculinity has been taken in stride by upper-middle class and upper-class boys and men, but it has been enormously destructive in the working- and lower-middle classes in all kinds of respects – political, cultural, and social. And the genius of the Murdoch empire has been to take this simmering rage – the loss of traditional masculine privilege, the loss of any kind of economic security, the loss of the breadwinner role – and to turn that into a political movement, into political power.

It’s not the first time it’s been done – Hitler’s propaganda chief Goebbels did the same thing. But in many ways the Murdoch empire is better run and more sophisticated than anything Goebbels put together.

RG: And the success of that backlash is just enormous. In supposedly in an era of sexual liberalization we have incredibly harsh sex laws, probably a higher percentage of people in prison for sex-related charges than ever, and some 700,000 people on sex-offender registries, living in internal exile under what is this era’s Jim Crow.

X: We’re living in the era of the most draconian official repression of certain kinds of sexual behavior that the world has ever seen. You could argue that certain Islamic societies show something similar – with the stoning of adulterers and the oppression of women. But it’s parallel to that that’s going on in the US today.

RG: But isn’t the social status of the kind of solid, middle-class professionals who donate to HRC pretty secure in any foreseeable economic configuration to come?

X: Well, as long as you can manage to keep the current system going, yes, it is secure. But as I say, is this capitalism’s final crisis? If so, and none of the standard Keynesian remedies can be applied for either political or economic reasons, then I think you’ll see a turn toward some kind of militarist Keynesianism.

And in such circumstances gays and women will find themselves expendable, or at least used deliberately as targets for rage in the same way that Goldstein is a target for rage in Orwell’s 1984. Remember that Goldstein was a stand-in for brainy Jews; people who were once essential both to the traditional power structures – who else were you going to go to to finance your wars? – and to both the intellectual and institutional foundations of the 1917 revolution.

But both the fascists and the Stalinists turned on the Jews once they seized power; they didn’t need them any more – or perhaps I should say they found a new use for them as targets to deflect rage away from power-holders. The same thing could happen to the gays, and they have never been as important to power-holders as the Jews traditionally had been. And they’ll have only themselves to blame.