Man/Boy Love
and the American Gay Movement

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SUMMARY. The issue of man/boy love has intersected the gay movement since the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the first gay rights movement in Germany. In the United States, as the gay movement has retreated from its vision of sexual freedom for all in favor of integration into existing social and political structures, it has sought to marginalize cross-generational love as a "non-gay" issue. The two movements continue to overlap, amid signs of mutual support as well as tension—a state of affairs that also characterizes their interrelationship in other countries. This article offers an overview and analysis of that interrelationship in the United States since the Stonewall Riots in New York City in June 1969, which marked the beginning of a reinvigorated struggle for gay liberation.

"Off the consenting adults bullshit!" So concluded this item in a gay newspaper not long after the June 1969 Stonewall Riots at a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village:

CHICKEN HAWKS NO LONGER IN DUTCH

The Netherlands continues to be one of the most liberal countries in the world. The Dutch government recently introduced a new parliamentary measure that would make most chicken legal. The new legal age for homosexual fun would be set at

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Church of the Beloved Disciple on April 4, the forum brought together a “panel of pederasts” to speak on the topic “Of Men and Boys: Pederasty and the Age of Consent.”

The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition, a cross-Canada group, also favored abolishing the age of consent. Many activists shared the view that the state had no business regulating sex between consenting partners, whatever their age.

Boy-lovers were involved in the gay movement from the beginning, and their presence was tolerated. Gay youth groups encouraged adults to attend their dances. Youth fought to be treated as equal participants in struggle—not as a category of innocents in need of special protection from homosexual seduction, as they are usually regarded today. There was a mood of tolerance, even joy at discovering the myriad lifestyles within the gay and lesbian subculture. “Love is a many-gendered thing,” read a banner at a 1971 gay demonstration in Albany, the New York State capital. Still, the issue of sex between adults and minors rarely arose.

**MAN/BOY LOVE HITS THE GAY MOVEMENT**

In 1977, the issue of sex between adults and minors moved abruptly to center stage. Anita Bryant began to articulate the mounting backlash to gay liberation by zeroing in on a perceived weak link: the widespread belief that gay men seduce young boys and turn them into queers. The name of her organization—Save Our Children—transparently implied this.

Simultaneously, a new hysteria about “kiddie porn” arose, fed by the political right and the feminist movement, with unmistakable suggestions that gay men who loved boys were in reality exploiting and abusing them. This clever propaganda ploy not only deftly exploited the public’s ignorance about homosexuality, but also caught the gay movement off guard: It was unprepared to make an intelligent rebuttal. Pederasty was a secret not to be told. Yet although man/boy love represented a minority phenomenon within the gay subculture, it was far from unusual.

The gay movement went into a defensive mode. “Oh, no, homosexuals don’t do that. Most child molestation is by heterosexual men against little girls.” It didn’t occur to gay spokespeople to
several participants were prominent in the gay and progressive movements, which gave the issue a new urgency. Afterwards, 30 boy-lovers and youth formed their first activist organization, the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). Boy-lovers and gay youth were becoming active protagonists.

The fact that boy-lovers had come out of their closet immediately embroiled the gay movement in controversy. *Gay Community News'* first 1979 issue published my "Statement to the Gay Liberation Movement on the Issue of Man/Boy Love," which challenged the movement to return to a vision of sexual liberation. It argued that "the ultimate goal of gay liberation is the achievement of sexual freedom for all—not just equal rights for 'lesbians and gay men,' but also freedom of sexual expression for young people and children." It criticized the movement for "limiting itself to a turf restricted to consenting adults" and behaving "as though sex had nothing—or little—to do with our struggle." It urged the movement not to limit its demands "to those thought acceptable to a frightened status quo."

This "manifesto" set off a debate that lasted several months. Much of the lesbian response was hostile and buttressed with arguments like "lesbians don't do that." But a piece by one lesbian feminist stood out for its sensible treatment of a topic heretofore passed over in silence: woman-girl love. Beth Kelly's "On 'Woman/Girl Love'—Or, Lesbians Do 'Do It'" noted that the ignorant reactions of many lesbians to man/boy love had helped her to understand "what it could mean to know that your most intensely private moments were nothing more than threads in the widely woven fabric of political experience that enfolds us all." A lifelong lesbian, she acknowledged being involved in cross-generational love "as a girl and as a woman." She described her sexual love for her great-aunt—more than 50 years her senior—when she was between eight and eleven years old. She summarized her journey to self-acceptance:

It has always seemed to me that people know when sex is a right thing for them to be doing, when mutually consented to, regardless of who else may or may not share or understand that
NEW JERSEY FEMINISTS RETREAT

Besides the debate in *Gay Community News*, the man/boy issue surfaced in 1979 in other ways. In response to lobbying by feminists from the National Organization for Women (NOW) and its Rape Task Force, the New Jersey state legislature had voted to lower the age of consent from 16 to 13 as part of a revision of the state’s penal code that also abolished the sodomy statute. The measures were to take effect in the fall. The feminists had argued that the age-of-consent law needlessly stigmatized sexually active youngsters under the age of 16. This sensible stance—never again voiced by any wing of the mainstream U.S. women’s movement—aroused the ire of a coalition of mothers, priests, and police, who staged noisy protests in the spring. New Jersey feminists agreed to a “compromise” that would keep the age of consent at 16 but would not criminalize sex between young people so long as the age differential was not greater than four years. Teenagers under 16—who were not consulted in this “compromise”—would still be denied the right to choose lovers in their late teens or older.

THE 1979 MARCH ON WASHINGTON

The man/boy love issue again surfaced early in 1979 at a national conference in Philadelphia which called the historic gay march on Washington, DC, set for October 14. On February 25, the conference adopted the Gay Youth Caucus proposal for a demand urging “Full Rights for Gay Youth, including revision of the age of consent laws.” At a meeting of the group’s newly elected National Coordinating Committee, held as soon as the conference had adjourned, lesbians threatened to split (thereby sabotaging the march) unless a substitute for the Gay Youth Caucus demand was adopted. It was.

The substitute—which was drafted by an adult lesbian and subsequently approved by a majority of the delegates in a mail poll (a favorite technique of the trade-union bureaucracy to prevent rank-and-file organization)—read: “Protect Lesbian and Gay Youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/
were guilty of "sexual abuse." It also sounded a note of censorship:

we will not passively march alongside pederast banners or signs, nor quietly stand and listen to pederast speeches at any march or rally. Lesbian Feminist Liberation will not support pederasts within the Lesbian and Gay movements nor anywhere else.9

LFL’s position suggested hostility to males. It did not go far enough, however, for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose delegate to the CLGR proposed that the group adopt a formal position “for the protection of male and female children from sexual abuse by adults.” He argued that “adults having sex with children is exploitation and is the antithesis of the fight for lesbian and gay rights.” He added, “I am not for giving children the right to consent to sex.” His motion was overwhelmingly defeated and a substitute passed expressing “opposition to the sexual abuse of children by homosexual or heterosexual people.” The SWP thereupon withdrew from the coalition and from the gay movement, and went on to lobby women’s groups not to participate in the October march on Washington, in part because the organizers were allegedly “soft” on child exploitation!

The SWP elaborated on its position in an article in its weekly newspaper attacking NAMBLA and the Gay Youth demand in favor of revising age-of-consent laws. The article showed how far a left-wing group could go toward adopting the agenda of the right wing on sexual matters:

The repeal of age-of-consent laws is a reactionary demand, even though its supporters try to pass themselves off as defenders of adolescents against legal victimization. The campaign around this demand has nothing to do with the totally progressive stance of defending the right of teenagers not to be penalized for their sexual activity. On the contrary, the advocates of repealing age-of-consent laws are primarily adult men who believe they should be unrestricted in having sex with children. Saying that children have the "right" to "consent" to sex
had a novel definition of pederasty ("the involvement of children by adults in sexual activity"!), and said, incongruously, that "it is well known that over 90% of all pederasts are heterosexual males who seek out young girls as their victims"! It also argued that "Pornography encourages both exploitation and violence whether or not it is heterosexual or homosexual in content." The authors of this resolution—widely interpreted as an attack on gay men—were clearly uninformed about male homosexuality and man/boy love.

Two statements critical of NOW were circulated by feminist, lesbian and gay activists. One, signed by more than 150 people, said the resolution represented "narrow bigotry promulgated under the rubric of loving concern." Supporters of it become allied with reactionary forces which are out to isolate and destroy all those who move beyond conventional boundaries. In giving credence to such ugly stereotypes as the boy-lover as child molester, they bolster and sanction the pathological anxieties of the common culture. . . . Since NOW is perceived to such a great degree as representing the feminist movement, the resolution makes all feminists appear to be advocates of timid respectability who automatically repudiate everything that seems strange and different—and at worst allies, however unwitting, of repressive ignorance and prejudice."

Controversy erupted again in 1981 when the Cornell University gay group, Gay People at Cornell (Gay PAC), invited me to be the keynote speaker at the annual May Gay festival. Over objections from some feminists, Gay PAC voted to reaffirm the invitation, but, following threats of pickets and a boycott of May Gay events by lesbians, withdrew it.

**REPRESSION INTENSIFIES**

On July 11, 1981, the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched their first attack on NAMBLA, arresting two members and a supporter in New York, and taking several teenage boys into custody. All three men were charged with consensual sex with minors. The arrests, dubbed "Operation Hawk" by the au-
attempted to link to the unexplained disappearance of six-year-old Etan Patz three and a half years earlier. The media spread allegations suggesting that NAMBLA had ties to prostitution, kidnappings, and production and distribution of kiddie porn. NAMBLA called simultaneous news conferences December 28 in New York City and Boston to refute the charges. The next day, the police "found" evidence in their files confirming NAMBLA's version of the events.  

**TUG OF WAR**

The fallout from this attempt to smear NAMBLA has continued as a kind of tug of war within the gay community.

On January 6, 1983, the Committee of Lesbian and Gay Male Socialists (CLGMS) sponsored a forum at the New York Marxist School at which I spoke on "Man/Boy Love and Sexual Freedom: What Position for Radicals?" Self-identified Christian terrorists threatened to attack the meeting. The Workers World Party provided a defense guard, and the meeting proceeded without incident.

In a letter to NAMBLA dated February 2, 1983, the gay Catholic group, Dignity, from Region II (New York and New Jersey) said that it had released a statement throughout the Church infrastructure dissociating itself from NAMBLA. The statement, sent to Roman Catholic bishops, diocesan communications offices and newspapers, and other gay religious organizations, charged that NAMBLA "fails to recognize" that "children should be free in their formative years from undue sexual influence of a heterosexual or homosexual nature." The statement, apparently intended to curry favor with the Catholic Church hierarchy (which in 1987 would crack down on Dignity itself, banning it from holding services in Catholic churches), said: "We believe it is imperative to maintain an age of consent in order to exercise one's sexuality in a responsible manner"—as if the role of the state was to ensure "responsible" sex! Dignity did not say what age of consent it supported. (The age in New Jersey is 16; in New York, 17; in Connecticut, 15.)

At its national conference in New York City in August 1985, one resolution
laws protect children, but did not explain how they accomplish this. Drawing on his own personal experience ("When I was 13, I simply wasn't ready for full-scale sexual relations.") the author advised setting the age at 15: "For a year or two, they will have to suffer this denial." But is it appropriate for gay adults to advise gay 14-year-olds to suffer in abstinence? Does this differ from the arguments of the right wing in favor of abstinence and against contraception?

The March 9, 1983, issue of another gay paper (now defunct), the New York City News, carried a three-page attack on NAMBLA by A. Damien Martin, an associate professor of communications at New York University and a director of the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY), which has received funding from the city and state for social services to gay and lesbian youth, and which began operating the city’s first gay high school in 1985. Martin’s article, “The Case Against NAMBLA: Why Are We Ignoring the Obvious?” began with an acknowledgment of the perceived beneficial aspects of his own sexual involvement as a teenager with a manfriend, and noted the "apparent violations of civil rights in the NAMBLA cases, the cynicism of the law enforcement agencies in bringing in the Etan Patz case, and the irresponsibility of the press.” Yet Martin insisted that "NAMBLA is an organization outside the movement with little or no relevance to its goals.”

**INSIDE OR OUTSIDE?**

In 1984 the debate on man/boy love shifted to the West Coast. In San Francisco, efforts to remove NAMBLA from the annual Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade failed, as they had in New York.

NAMBLA’s October 1984 convention in San Francisco’s Pride Center included a public panel discussion on “Man/Boy Love and Sexual Liberation” with Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay; Jim Kepner, curator of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles; Morris Kight, long-time gay rights and social activist from Los Angeles; Jes Harrison, a 16-year-old gay youth; and me. The participation of Hay, Kepner, and Kight was welcome
1986, following adoption of a gay civil rights bill by the New York City Council, NAMBLA again applied for the right to rent space in the center. When its request was again denied, it filed a complaint of discrimination against the center with the city’s Human Rights Commission. The commission refused to hear the complaint. In the fall of 1989, the center denied space to NAMBLA for a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg. The board refused to explain its denial.

In August 1985 NAMBLA’s application for membership in New York’s Council of Lesbian and Gay Organizations resulted in its being admitted by a close vote. (A subsequent effort to expel it failed.) A couple of months earlier, the International Gay Association had accepted NAMBLA as a member group. The IGA (now known as the International Lesbian and Gay Association) has had a position in favor of abolishing age-of-consent laws since its meeting in Washington, DC, in the fall of 1981, but continues to be of mixed mind about the issue.

In Los Angeles, NAMBLA had participated in Gay Pride marches as part of a contingent opposing U.S. intervention in El Salvador, but in 1985 its application to march as a group in its own right was denied by the business-oriented organizing group, Christopher Street West (CSW).

At the 1986 Los Angeles march, veteran activist Harry Hay, marching with the Radical Faeries (a group he founded), wore a hand-made sign stating, simply, “NAMBLA walks with me.” The organizers, apparently apoplectic, summoned mounted police, who surrounded the Faery contingent and threatened to arrest Hay if he did not remove his sign. He refused.23

**CHILD ABUSE HYSTERIA**

During the past few years, hysteria about “child sexual abuse” reached new peaks in the United States. The hysteria has heightened the fears of an uninformed public. It has served to soften up public opinion for right-wing attacks on civil liberties and “vice.” It may also represent a kind of coup within the “helping professions” by social workers and psychologists anxious to break out of their poor cousin status and, like psychiatrists, promote themselves as indispensable “expert witnesses” in court. Police departments
community of the need for socialized medicine or a national health insurance (and barely audible noises from the moribund left)—despite the fact that the United States is the only "advanced" Western society without such a program. Socialized medicine is the only way to insure effective health delivery to persons with AIDS, whose hospital costs may reach $150,000 by the time they die.  

History is a pendulum on which things often change into their opposite. Lurches forward and setbacks, not an incremental advance, characterize the struggle for social change. The controversies over boy-love have been around since the beginning of the gay movement a century ago. The fact that they are again being debated demonstrates both the fragility of the gay movement's achievements before it was wiped out by Hitler and Stalin, and the irrepressibility of aspirations for sexual freedom.

NOTES

1. San Francisco Free Press, November 1-14, 1969. The news item appeared on page 3, which was dominated by the head "IN THE STREETS FOR THE REVOLUTION." Elsewhere in the issue was an ad for a catalogue from D.O.M. offering "the first in young male nude photography." D.O.M. was a pseudonym for pioneer gay activist Guy Strait, who died in 1987. (See the obituary by John Fish in the NAMBLA Bulletin, January-February 1988.)

2. The Preamble to GAA's constitution demanded "an immediate end to all oppression of homosexuals" and certain "basic rights," including "THE RIGHT TO LOVE. This is the right to express our feelings in action, the right to make love with anyone, anyway, anytime, provided only that such action be freely chosen by individuals involved." GAA's policy, adopted in the early seventies, was "to work for the immediate change in all laws to remove restrictions related to homosexual acts between consenting persons." The reference to "consenting persons" rather than "consenting adults" was deliberate. The group's pamphlet 20 Questions about Homosexuality skirted the question of cross-generational love, stating only that "Homosexuals join heterosexuals in agreeing that young people as well as adults must be protected from unwanted sexual advances . . . " (question 17, emphasis added).

3. In their book Homosexualities, based on research conducted over the previous decade, Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg found that 25% of "white homosexual males" and 14% of "black homosexual males" had had as sexual partners boys who were 16 or younger when they themselves were 21 or older (pp. 18 and 311).

5. Gay Community News, January 6, 1979, p. 5.
like it was designed to look good on grant applications—expelled three members of NAMBLA on the grounds that man/boy love was incompatible with its goals. "We felt from the beginning that NAMBLA's goals and priorities were antithetical to the needs of gay and lesbian youth," Martin told the New York Native (July 1-14, 1985). He said that his institute tells gay youth that one of their options is to "postpone sex until it can be more satisfying." This sounds like the advice of the Reagan Administration, whose Adolescent Family Life Program funded 71 projects in 1981 urging teenagers to practice sexual abstinence. Martin was appointed by Governor Mario Cuomo to the New York State Council on Youth Suicide Prevention in the fall of 1985. At the New York City Gay Pride March on June 30, 1985, some of the IPLGY youths broke into a chant of "2, 4, 6, 8—How do you know your wife is straight? 3, 5, 7, 9—Hey, lady, your husband's mine!" They were quickly shushed up by one of IPLGY's top men.

23. A member of the contingent tore off Hay's sign, ostensibly to protest the interference with Hay's right to carry whatever sign he wanted. Hay escaped arrest, but CSW's attempt to censor a founder of the American gay movement aroused widespread indignation. This did not prevent CSW from formally voting to censure Hay a few weeks later.

24. Private communication to author from a lesbian girl-lover.
25. This "realism" is not new. The boy-love movement in Germany at the beginning of the century arose as part of the new homosexual activism and self-organization, and its trajectory intersected that of the broader gay movement. Boy-lovers were hardly (as A. Damien Martin put it) "outside the movement"—one of the first gay magazines, Der Eigene, was inspired by boy-love and anarchism. But then, as now, the two groupings did not always see eye to eye. Some of the issues they confronted are still around today (the nature of same-sex love, sexual liberation or law reform, the age of consent, attitudes toward women's liberation). On these, boy-lovers had views that differed from those of other homosexuals, as well as from each other. The anarchist boy-lover John Henry Mackay, for example, who wrote under the pen name Sagitta, was indignant at the efforts of Magnus Hirschfeld's Scientific Humanitarian Committee to trade off repeal of Paragraph 175, the sodomy statute, for setting an age of consent at 16. "For it has been shown again in these years," he wrote in the preface to the 1924 edition of his Buecher der namenlosen Liebe (Books of the Nameless Love), "that this love has to look for its worst enemies among those who call themselves 'leaders' in this fight and have made themselves responsible, in one of their ridiculous and degrading petitions to those currently in power, have publicly advocated an 'age of consent'—not for children, but for mature boys and youths—and thereby the prosecution and punishment of those whom they know, as no others do, to be just as innocent as themselves, and once again those who love an older

Hirschfeld, M. Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen [Yearbook for intermediate sexual types].


People organize to protest recent NOW resolution on lesbian and gay rights. (1981). In Heresies No. 12 (“sex issue”).


