

lishman Michael Aspinall, who is billed as "the Surprising Soprano."

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## OPPRESSION, GAY

The concept of gay oppression was disseminated by the Gay Liberation Front founded in New York City in the summer of 1969 and by similar groups elsewhere that took GLF as their model and ideological paradigm.

*Early Statements and Background.* In a typical statement, the British Gay Liberation Front declared (December 1970) that its first priority was "to defend the immediate interests of gay people against discrimination and social oppression." It added that "the roots of the oppression that gay people suffer run deep in our society, in particular to the structure of the family, patterns of socialization, and the Judeo-Christian culture. Legal reform and education against prejudice, though possible and necessary, cannot be a permanent solution. While existing social structures remain, social prejudice and overt repression can always re-emerge. . . . GLF therefore sees itself as part of the wider movement aiming to abolish all forms of social oppression." Among the social groups suffering from one of the multifarious forms of oppression, its manifesto listed women, black people and other national minorities, the working class, young people, and peoples oppressed by imperialism.

This bill of grievances grew out of the experience and the thinking of the New Left in the late 1960s, which saw repressive practices at work in many areas of Western society where the inferior status of particular segments of the population had been taken for granted or justified as

necessary on utilitarian grounds. The analogies with the disadvantaged condition of the aforementioned social categories shaped the notion of "gay oppression" as a pervasive set of wrongs inflicted by an establishment that imposed a heterosexual norm on the whole of society. Obligatory heterosexuality, the need to conceal one's sexual identity, the social ostracism and economic boycott to which known homosexuals were subjected, police harassment and sporadic violence at the hands of hooligans, the entire structure of privilege which the Judeo-Christian tradition conferred on the patriarchal family—all these burdens that the homosexual had to endure in an intolerant society were ascribed to a system of oppression that the Gay Liberation Front aspired to overthrow, along with the rest of the injustices for which the capitalist order was held responsible.

An Italian writer appealing to the classical Marxist tradition, Mario Mieli, went even further, asserting that "the monosexual Norm . . . is based on the mutilation of Eros, and in particular on the condemnation of homosexuality. It is clear from this that only when we understand why the homoerotic impulse is repressed in the majority, by the whole mechanism of society, will we be able to grasp how the exclusive or at least highly predominant assertion of heterosexual desire in the majority comes about." He added that the process of repression began in childhood, when homosexual tendencies are branded as "feminine" and shameful, and the whole subject is treated as unspeakable.

*Realities of Oppression.* Such concepts were undoubtedly shaped in large measure by the personal experiences which many gay activists had to undergo at various times in their lives, when they confronted head-on the hostility of society and its relentless pressure to conform to the norm of heterosexuality. Still later, they were able to see how across centuries of European history homosexuals had been the object of persecution as ferocious as

that inflicted on religious minorities and ethnic groups, how the very existence of the homosexual minority had been denied by a church which claimed to uphold ideals of justice and humanity. In some respects the oppression of homosexuals was greater than that of demographic categories which may have been denied political and economic rights and been marginalized by the practice of segregation and ostracism, but at least had a recognized place, however unenviable, in the social order. The most crying aspect of the injustice was its invisibility to the rest of society, which either tacitly accepted it or was simply unaware that it existed.

Appeals to the courts for the recognition of homosexual rights had met with flat rejection on the grounds that homosexual behavior was *per se* immoral and illegal, while the validity of the ascetic morality was unchallenged. The further pressure of ostracism served to keep the victims of oppression from fighting back, because their efforts would only intensify the rejection and marginality. Worst of all was that many homosexuals internalized the guilt and self-reproach instilled by the attitudes of society.

All these phenomena found parallels in the oppression of other social and economic groups in the contemporary world, and the sense of kinship and solidarity with them buoyed the spirits of the founders of the radical organizations that "took to the streets" as part of the radical upsurge of the late 1960s. The goal of "ending gay oppression" became part of the universal struggle for justice and equality which seemed to be inching forward with every independence movement in the former colonies and every campaign of a minority for the rights which it had been unjustly denied.

*Problems.* Some difficulties arise with this overall analysis of the situation of homosexuals in terms of oppression. First, the situation of homosexuals presents notable differences from that of eth-

nic minorities. These incompatibilities emerge when gay leaders meet exasperating rebuffs, as they often do, in their efforts to build coalitions with leaders of ethnic blocs. Significantly, the late Harvey Milk, one of the most successful practitioners of coalition politics, achieved his goals mainly with San Francisco's old-line labor movement rather than with the city's ethnic leaders.

Another difficulty has to do with the broader contextualization of the idea of oppression. As practiced up to now, the analysis of oppression tends to be embedded in two broader ideologies, neither of which now enjoys hegemony in any western society. A major strand of the Judeo-Christian worldview sees the rich and powerful as obstacles to the work of redemption, for their heartless subjugation of the poor and downtrodden stands in the way of the achievement of a just society. While this critique is currently most salient in Liberation Theology, it has a substantial biblical foundation, for the concept was a creation of the Hebrew prophets of the **Old Testament**, who lent it the full force of their moral authority and powerful eloquence. A not dissimilar value-contrast appears in Marxism, with its perception of the class struggle between the exploiters and the proletariat—though it seeks to ground its interpretation of the phenomenon of oppression in an economic analysis rather than an appeal to religious eschatology. Quite apart from the growing disenchantment of the larger society with both these ideologies, gay people have many reproaches to address to both, owing to their histories of homophobia.

There is also a **counterculture** concept that was loosely invoked in the late 1960s as the right to reject as "oppressive" every cultural norm or every demand made on the individual by society. Such an approach ill coincides with the mounting need of advanced industrial societies for a highly self-disciplined citizenry, and is wholly incompatible with the renuncia-

tion of individual self-interest that collectivist ideologies such as Marxism formally entail.

As has been noted, all subsequent analyses of oppression stem from the original insights of the Hebrew Prophets. While it is theoretically possible to devise a critique of oppression independent of both the Judeo-Christian tradition and its Marxist offshoot, the task has not been seriously attempted, and it is hard to see what framework might serve the purpose. Detached from the larger intellectual context that would give it meaning, the discourse of oppression now seems rhetorical. While it undoubtedly encapsulates social and psychological realities, it does so in a partial way that many find unsatisfying.

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## ORAL SEX

Human oral sex may be said to be the one family of sexual practices that is truly universal, inasmuch as it is common to heterosexuals, male homosexuals, and lesbians. Although oral sex is widely diffused among the world's societies, past and present, no detailed studies have been made as to the reasons for its relative popularity—in comparison with anal sex, for example—and the relevant correlations with other cultural traits. One reason why many prefer it to anal sex is the absence of the pain and discomfort often initially experienced by the passive partner in the latter activity, particularly if the sphincter has not been sufficiently loosened.

*Mouth-to-Penis Activity.* The ancient Mediterranean peoples were familiar with this behavior in both its homosexual and heterosexual forms. The Romans distinguished between fellatio—in which the penetrating partner remains relatively motionless, allowing his receptive partner to do most of the work—and irrumation, in which the penetrator engages in vigorous buccal or laryngeal thrusts. Depending on the individual, both are felt to enhance the penetrator's masculinity: in fellatio the beneficiary of the action luxuriates in making the other service him completely, while in irrumation he has the converse satisfaction of being able to give full vent to the impulse to aggressive penile thrusts. In modern writings, however, it is usual to refer to both forms simply as fellatio; the street terms "cock-sucking," "blow job," and "(giving/getting) head" are also current.

There are three common positions in this form of sexual activity. In the first, the penetrator stands, while his partner kneels, sits, or crouches to take the erect member in his mouth. In the second main position, the penetrator lies on his back, and the insertee crouches over him or lies between his legs. In the third position, especially suitable for irrumation, the insertee lies on his back with head propped up, and the penetrator straddles his chest, leaning forward over his head while thrusting forward. Of course there are many variants and intermediate positions.

The novice fellator tends to be inexpert in various ways that may prove frustrating to his partner. Since he has usually not yet overcome the gag reflex, he may take only the head of his partner's member in his mouth rather than depthroating it, which is optimal. Furthermore, anxiety about ejaculation may cause him to slow his movements or even freeze up at the stage in which the tempo of the action should be increased. With relaxation and experience these difficulties are usually overcome, and many prac-