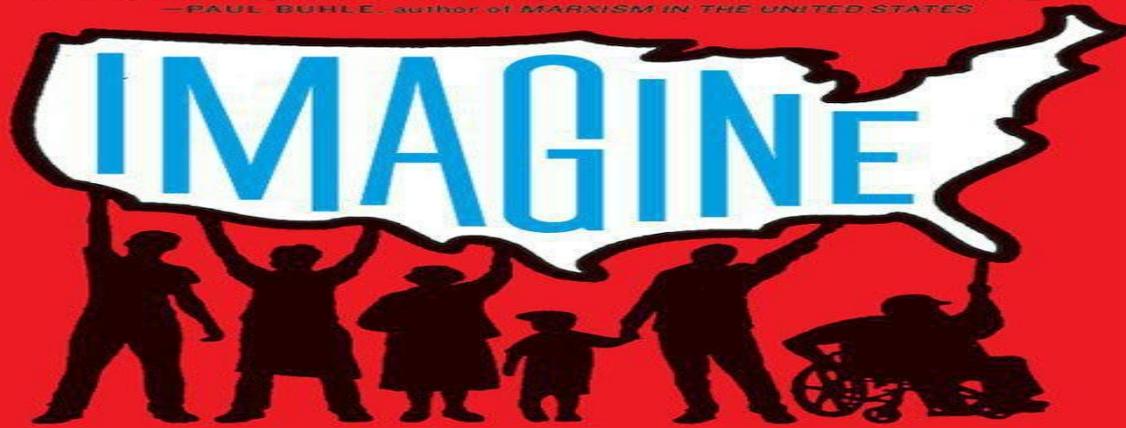


"The best, most insightful, and most lively work on socialism to appear in a long time."
—PAUL BUHLE, author of *MARXISM IN THE UNITED STATES*



★ LIVING IN A ★

SOCIALIST USA

Edited by Frances Goldin, Debby Smith,
and Michael Steven Smith

Chapter 11

How Queer Life Might Be Different in a Socialist USA

Leslie Cagan and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

When a handful of gay men and transvestites fought back against yet one more police raid on a gay bar in New York in June 1969, no one could have imagined what was being unleashed. It didn't take long for gays, lesbians, and other nonconforming sexual minorities to find the power of a collective, public voice. Within months a new movement was in the streets, a movement that added a new layer of insight into the complexity of human behavior and the ways social, cultural, political, and economic structures define our lives.

At this moment in history, we are asking how our lives as lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and those questioning and exploring their sexuality (LGBTQ) might be different in the context of socialism. Today, it's a little hard to see how this might happen, how massive numbers of people would move our nation from capitalism to socialism in a nonviolent revolution. But because we know how capitalism undermines our humanity and corrupts human interaction, we believe it is inevitable that this malignant economic system will collapse and be replaced by what we call socialism.

Our concept of socialism is not limited to restructuring work and economic activity. It embraces altering the full range of social, cultural, political, and familial structures and power relations. It goes far beyond just having an economic structure that's grounded in meeting our collective needs instead of one based on private profit. We cannot imagine creating socialism without eradicating racism, for instance. Our analysis and organizing practice must understand how different kinds of oppressive power relations—those based in race, gender, and sexuality, as well as in economic activity—are interwoven and give shape to one another. Just as our lives are not merely the work we do, the socialism we build must address all aspects of power, all of the institutional forces that affect our lives.

Our experience as workers is not merely shaped by the wage we earn or the power the boss has over us. For example, a black, Latina, or other woman of color is much more likely to be paid less and treated worse by her bosses than a straight white man. Our personal experiences of capitalism are informed by how we experience race, gender, and sexuality. And this cuts all ways: how we experience race is informed by our class, gender, and sexuality realities, and so forth.

The socialism we envision will build on the strengths and insights of what's often referred to as identity politics, while avoiding its pitfalls and weaknesses. The movements of people of color, women, LGBTQ people, youth, seniors, the disabled, and more all uncovered layers of oppression and shed new light on the dynamics and hierarchies of power. Only by weaving together the movements that attack abusive power in all of its manifestations will we be strong enough to tackle the monster of capitalism.

What will queer people's lives be like after we've displaced capitalism and built a new socialism? We can start with the basics: an end to discrimination, bigotry, and hatred. Each of us accepted for the fullness of who and what we are, including our sexual and gender identities. No one turned away from a job or denied a promotion because of their queerness. No one barred from housing because of their family relations. No one mocked or bullied or harassed because of their sexuality or the perception of their sexuality. No killing, no violence.

LGBTQ people would have the same access as straight people to all cultural, social, political, and economic structures and would be part of reshaping those structures. For instance, if marriage is still needed to help ensure the rights of loving couples, then all LGBTQ people who wanted to would be able to marry. LGBTQ people would be able to have, or adopt, and raise children either as single parents, with a partner, or within a more complex family structure.

All of that is just the first layer, just the starting point. The LGBTQ struggle has shed light on issues that people have dealt with from the beginning of time—issues of sexuality and sexual expression, gender and gender identity. But shedding light does not necessarily mean finding all of the answers. In fact, perhaps some questions have no definitive answer. Are our sexual desires and needs determined by biology—are we born this way? Or do we make choices and have conscious preferences? Or might there be some combination of these forces at play?

Living in a socialist society would not mean that all these issues will be settled; it would mean that all of the hard questions would be out in the open for full discussion because we'd be living in a culture that encouraged honest exploration of every aspect of our lives. All of the possibilities of love, sexual expression, and gender identity would be accepted as part of the human experience. (This does not mean that each individual would have to engage in all variations of those.) There

would be no compulsory monogamy, and no campaigns to “smash monogamy.” There would be no obligation to marry, just as there would be no restrictions on marriage. Indeed, the whole notion of marriage might shift since there would be no special privileges associated with it.

No one would be denied the right to explore their own sexual and gender realities, needs, and desires. There would be no shame assigned to sexual desires. In fact, desire would be appreciated for the role it plays in helping to make us full human beings. Sex would not be defined as primarily or solely an activity to ensure the survival of the human race, but as the pleasurable, joyful, desire-filling interaction between people it can be. It would be appreciated and encouraged, while no one would be forced into sexual activity. The layers of embarrassment that are all too often now associated with sex would be stripped away. And in that process, the positive power of sexuality would be released and honored.

The creation of socialism would allow for a new exploration of sexuality. There will still be many questions people answer differently, such as issues of monogamy or polyamory, challenges communities will struggle with, and concerns to which we might not always find common approaches.

Even complex and sometimes troubling issues such as sex between adults and minors would be discussed without assumptions of guilt or imposition of shame. For instance, would there be an “age of consent” that most people are comfortable with, and if so, what might that be? A relationship between a boy of sixteen or seventeen who is just coming out and a gay man in his thirties or forties might be quite positive and healthy, but it might still bother some people. And unless sexism and racism have been eradicated, how would racial or male/female power dynamics factor into these issues?

Also, where would lines be drawn: Is there not a difference between a sixteen-year-old and a ten-year-old, for example? Are lines to be drawn when it comes to sadism or masochism, desires related to submission and domination, or bondage and discipline? If there are such lines, a major concern would be how issues of enforcement might play out.

In a socialist culture, the current norms of male and female gender identity would be things of the past. Gender identity would not be based on the biological differences between male and female, although we certainly would not hide or deny those differences. People would not be mocked for what they were, or how they walk down the street. How we dressed our bodies would be based entirely on our own choices. Each of us would be encouraged to love and respect our own bodies and, therefore, the bodies of other people. At the same time, the decision to alter one’s body or to change one’s gender would also be respected and accepted.

Sex would not be a commodity to be bought and sold on the market. Capitalism makes everything a commodity—soon we will be charged for the air we breathe! In socialism, things will probably still be bought and sold, but the decisions about what to make and what to sell, about how to make things and how to sell them, will be based on what people need and not on what increases the coffers of individuals or expands the power of privately owned enterprises.

The women’s liberation movement shed light on the ways women’s bodies have been used as promotional tools to sell a wide range of products. Of course, women’s bodies (and also those of children and men) have for centuries been sold or rented for the pleasure of (mostly) men. This would come to an end under socialism. Or would it? This is another one of those hard questions.

We are not critical of sex workers, and we know there are many reasons people have taken up this line of work, not necessarily just economic need. We can imagine that there might still be some type of sex workers within a socialist culture, but just as all other types of work relations will be different than what we experience under capitalism, we would hope that their work relations would not be based on exploitation, abuse of power, and fear of violence.

Under socialism, LGBTQ people will have the full civil, legal, and human rights that everyone will benefit from. Beyond that, because the insights of both the feminist and the queer liberation movements will have been absorbed into the core analysis and philosophy of the struggle for socialism, everyone will be able to more fully experience who they are, how they express themselves sexually, and their own gender identity.

All of this will be integrated into the new realities that our work against racism, sexism, and the oppression and exploitation of capitalist class relations will have brought to the creation of socialism. None of these pieces will find fruition without the other parts being in full force. Our vision of socialism brings it all together, for the benefit of all.