

Beyond Gay Marriage and Queer Separatists—The Call for a Working-Class Queer Movement

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The gay marriage debate has taken over all the attention from the queer movement left and right. The right wing is consistently and stubbornly denying the existence of queer folks by saying that it's an immoral choice of lifestyle. The liberal gay and lesbian organizations are continually pulling millions and millions of dollars to appeal to the state for marriage equality under the rhetoric of "we are all the same." On the other hand, queer separatists are fiercely combating the liberals with the slogan: "we are totally and absolutely different from the heteros," and have made good points on criticizing the oppressive patriarchal nature of the institution of marriage and how queers should not seek this type of inclusion (see: [against equality](#)). However, these critiques have not necessarily been able to generate an alternative grassroots movement which can seriously take on the demands of those queers who are marginalized—queer people of color, trans folks, working-class queers, queers with disabilities, and third world and immigrant queers—from all of the above approaches.

There has been a series of intolerable queer violence that occurred very recently in the country—torture, youth suicide, school bullying—while the violence is nothing new to queer folks, it is urgently calling for the communities' response to these issues. Though the liberals are posting heartwarming videos and articles and holding vigils saying that "it gets better" ([Dan Savage's video](#)), we know that the fight cannot end here. As oppressed folks we know that queer oppression does not end when we graduate from high school bullying and move to San Francisco and suddenly become successful professionals who hang out in fancy bars and overcome all of our internal and external conflicts. Here are QPOCs' responses to queer youth suicides: "[It doesn't get better. You get stronger](#)" and "[For colored boys that speak softly](#)" [Yosimar Reyes; "for colored boys that speak softly"](#) from [Corduroy Media](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The liberals see gay marriage as the end of the queer struggle, and have this fantasy that if gay marriage was legal national-wide, then soon it would “trickle down” to the marginalized communities and thus end all queer oppression.

We know for a fact that the gay marriage demand alone is incapable of solving our problems of physical, psychological, and economic violence, but instead normalizes a different though limited type of family under capitalism. Criticizing the approach of marriage equality alone has not helped much with movement building either. The debate overall has clearly not been very productive so far, but instead, it has instigated so much anxiety among the queer communities—many politically conscious queers are having panic attacks just over the moral decisions of choosing to support and/or participate in gay marriage if they had the rights to do so. All this overwhelming anxiety around the gay marriage issue is exactly because that there has not been an alternative queer movement that can channel the energy, and this debate has been monopolized in the framework of “individual choice” and “individual freedom.” Under this liberal ideology, many queer folks think that, of course we should have the right as individuals to choose who we love, who we want to have sex, and who we want to have family with! If straight people do why can’t we?! While queer folks are absolutely discriminated against by the heterosexist state which should not be tolerated, seeking freedom under this individualist ideology has not gotten us too far. Instead of carving out a tiny gay space out of the small stream of bourgeois, legislative rights, can we imagine a kind of sexual freedom that is for all people? A kind of freedom where a single mom is able to bring up her child without feeling obligations to marry? A kind of freedom that no one would be restrained in pantyhose at work anymore? A kind of freedom that as a culture we are finally not tabooed to talk about sex, but does not idealize or professionalize it either? A kind of freedom that everyone would play with gender without shame, and a culture that no youth would commit suicide because of school bullying, or because they might just have a different sexual fantasy? A kind of place that no one would be afraid to walk the streets at night, where none of our body parts—our brains or our genitals—are pathologized. A kind of freedom that is multifaceted, and does not merely carve out a different shape of

box to fit in a particular sexuality, but opens up the possibility to more creative desires for everyday folks.

The mainstream gay movement today has hijacked the revolutionary sexual liberation movement in the 70s and turned it into a short-sighted individual rights agenda. They assume that every queer person has the same class position and desires the same kind of American Dream. Their answer to the queer working-class concern is that marriage can help poor folks get access to spousal benefits such as health insurance—which is fundamentally contradictory. For instance, many of our partners do not have health insurance in the first place because we do not have stable jobs or jobs that offer it in the first place. That said, the issue of gay marriage should not merely be decided by who participates in it. Rather, we should ask—who are the people controlling the movement? Whose voices are not heard? And, what is our alternative? While having equal rights can perhaps open up more space for our struggle, we cannot let the liberals such as the Human Rights Campaign and Democrats define our movement. We also cannot let the queer separatists defeat us and push us out of the struggle.

What we need is to build an issue-focused working-class movement that centers queer analysis. Our demands should cut across sexuality and gender lines, while fore-fronting and popularizing queer needs. We should demand universal health care that includes access to hormones, gender reassignment surgeries, and an anti-heterosexist health system that does not attempt to pathologize our queer bodies and erase the traumas we face in a violent homophobic society. We should demand asylum for all immigrants and not solely rely on the liberal, imperialist reform agenda such as the DREAM Act that attempts to draft the youth from our communities into the oppressive military system. These need to be our demands because we know that our fate as workers are bound up with the exploitation of the undocumented workers and the exploitation of youth of color. Today, anti-queer violence erodes our sense of community and leaves us feeling raw, vulnerable, and fearful for ours and our friends' safety. This is a crucial time for queers and allies who distrust the state and the police to come together and mobilize from the grassroots to defend ourselves from homophobic violence. We

should take the lesson from the initial domestic violence movement which set up grassroots phone trees, patrols, and shelters to challenge patriarchal violence in the households and in the streets. Today, we need to resurrect this sense of grassroots unity that links our struggles together and not to rely on the compromised liberals and non-profits, or the homophobic, racist state institutions that divide and assault our communities.

When the gay liberal assimilationists say to middle-class straight folks, "we are just like you," and the queer separatists on the other say "hell no we are nothing like you" and form their own blocs, we should be the force that says to every day folks who struggle that "we are just like you, and you are actually just like us"—because queer folks have always been part of the working-class and we are not fundamentally different from one another. Our oppression as queers is not a fixed pathology. It is a product of the heteronormative, homophobic society, and it does not have to stay that way forever. In fact, the essence of queer liberation lies within the ability for everyone to celebrate and experiment their sexuality, gender, and desire. It is not enough to only carve out another limited category of acceptable sexuality for a certain group of people. This kind of change is not liberation—it is a very limited imagination of freedom. We need to start off with this fundamental vision of uniting the working-class and queer struggles and ensure that not any part of ourselves will be forced to compromise in the movement.

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