

Sexual liberation: fighting lesbian and gay oppression

Rachel Morgain

Over the past three decades, the social conditions of lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities in Australia have undergone dramatic changes. Whereas there was a resounding silence about sexual relationships between women until the 1960s, laws against homophobic discrimination today cover most lesbians. Whereas the media once consistently depicted gay men as perverted and their sexual activity was subject to severe penalties, now some Australian legal systems recognise that many gay men play an important role in the lives of their partners and their partners' children. The struggles against sexual oppression in Australia began in earnest during the early 1970s and won significant improvements, major changes to the law in all States and Territories, and widespread social acceptance of same-sex relationships.

Yet lesbians and gay men continue to experience oppression. Despite the decriminalisation of homosexuality in all States and Territories, and the introduction of same-sex relationship legislation in most, legal equality for lesbians and gay men is still far from being a reality. In some cases, clauses about sexual orientation in anti-discrimination laws exempt jobs that involve working with children. Many jurisdictions allow religious institutions to discriminate against their staff and, in the case of religious schools, their students as well. Most States and Territories prevent same-sex couples from adopting children and limit access by lesbians to donor insemination services. In many, people in same sex relationships can be legally denied spousal benefits by their partners' employers. Under South Australian, Northern Territory and Commonwealth laws there is little legal recognition of same-sex relationships.¹

Furthermore, lesbian and gay oppression is a much deeper problem than legal inequality. It takes the forms of a pervasive culture of homophobia, systematic discrimination and ideological assaults by media commentators, politicians and other public figures. From 1996, the conservative Government of John Howard mounted a series of attacks against queers (people whose sexuality does not conform to conservative heterosexual norms), accompanied by widespread media vilification. The most drawn out episode occurred when the doctor of a Victorian woman successfully contested the State Government's ban on access to fertility services for single women and lesbians, by appealing to federal laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of marital status.

The case sparked a strong conservative reaction. The Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne suggested that the court finding created a 'massive social experiment' that would give rise to 'a generation of stolen children', a concern echoed by independent Senator Brian Harradine.² The federal Government attempted, unsuccessfully, to change its anti-discrimination legislation to undermine the judgment. Then, in an unprecedented move, it granted the Catholic Bishops Conference the right to appeal the findings to the High Court.³ Their arguments centred around the claim that allowing a woman without a male partner to reproduce would violate the rights of her child. Howard claimed that all children should have 'the prospect of the care and affection of both a mother and a father'.⁴ Though the appeal failed, the fertility services licencing agency in Victoria interpreted the original decision as applying only to medically infertile women, thus excluding other single women and lesbians from access to safe donor insemination services.⁵

Similar arguments underpinned the Government's ban on gay marriage. Howard claimed that marriage was about 'providing for the survival of the species', implying that only reproduction in a heterosexual union could be considered as contributing to humanity's well being.⁶ When Labor spokesperson, Nicola Roxon, announced her Party's support for the legislation, affirming that marriage should be 'a union of a man and a woman', she received a standing ovation from representatives of religious organisations at a forum on marriage in Parliament House.⁷ The

Catholic Bishops Conference, backed up by a Vatican report labelling same sex relationships 'deviant and immoral', also loudly supported the ban.⁸ Such arguments enshrine the heterosexual nuclear family as the norm, link homosexuality to fears about social decay and reinforce perceptions of lesbians and gay men as unnatural, selfish and particularly unsuited to caring for children. And they are only part of the process that sustains prejudice and discrimination against people who are not regarded as 'normal' and heterosexual. In schools⁹, in magazines and at the movies, for example, it is still rare to find sympathetic portrayals of lesbians or gay men. As a consequence, homophobic attitudes pervade Australian society and many queers feel isolated because of their sexuality.

Lesbians' and gay men's experiences of abuse reflect the pervasiveness of homophobia. Surveys have found between eight and thirty per cent of lesbians and gay men experience homophobic violence over their lives.¹⁰ A recent study of homophobia in workplaces found that just over 67 per cent of lesbians and 57 per cent of gay men had experienced such treatment, including ridicule, sexual harassment, accusations of paedophilia and threatened or actual physical and sexual abuse. A significant proportion reported being denied workplace entitlements, one in six believed they had been refused a job and one in twenty believed they had lost their most recent job as a result of their sexuality. Many reported stress, depression and illness as a consequence, and a large number had thought about suicide.¹¹ Given such findings, it is not surprising that people in sexual minorities are more likely than heterosexuals to suffer from anxiety and depression, contemplate suicide and misuse alcohol.¹²

The consequences of homophobia can be particularly severe for young people, who are generally dependent on the support of their families and schools for physical and emotional security. Many young lesbians and gay men feel isolated, confused and severely depressed.¹³ Research on young gay men showed that nearly one in ten had been bashed and almost 15 per cent had been refused service because of their sexuality--both around twice the rate experienced by older gay men.¹⁴ Young gay men are at least three times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Among young lesbians the rate of suicide attempt appears to be even higher.¹⁵ Young people who are rejected by their families because of their sexuality lose an important potential source of assistance in finding work or continuing to study. Many are traumatised and some become homeless, making them particularly vulnerable to self-harm and suicide.¹⁶ Homophobia appears to be widespread in schools too; discrimination, harassment, abuse and lack of support from peers and administrations is often intensified by a curriculum that fails to acknowledge or value homosexuality.¹⁷ The children of lesbian and gay parents also suffer from this kind of homophobia. One research project reported that almost half of those interviewed had experienced bullying or teasing about their parents' sexuality and most received little or no support from their school.¹⁸

Sexual oppression has far-reaching implications, shaping the way that all of us experience our sexuality. Two studies show that there is a substantial group of people who identify as exclusively heterosexual even though they have had sexual encounters with members of the same sex or report being attracted to the same sex. This group is many times larger than those who see themselves as homosexual or bisexual.¹⁹ Levels of psychosocial distress are generally higher in these three groups than among those who report exclusively heterosexual desires and experiences, and were greatest among those who said they are attracted to members of the same sex but have never acted on that attraction.²⁰ These statistics indicate that a large number of people are, with good reasons, reluctant to identify themselves as bisexual or homosexual.

Sexual identity is not a straightforward, static feature of an individual's personality. Common sense ideas, public policies and laws encourage some expressions of sexuality and repress others. Furthermore, what is regarded as 'normal' sexual behaviour has differed dramatically over time and among different societies. These differences are conditioned by the interests of classes grounded in production: other modes of production have given rise to different forms of family and ways of understanding sexuality. In classical Greece, for example, it was considered natural for adult men to

develop a sexual desire for boys. This was related to the separation of sexuality from reproduction. As the bulk of the slave labour force was bought outside Greece, rather than being born there, and because having many children would spread the available surplus more thinly in slave-owning families, reproductive sex was not a priority. Sex between men and boys was an acceptable alternative to heterosexual sex.²¹ In capitalist societies, the nuclear family is the most important institution for the reproduction of the working class. It provides the primary care for the existing labour force and produces new generations of workers (see chapter 6). The repression of queer relationships is part of the massive ideological process that props up the family, the oppression of women and the sexual division of labour. In this way, it helps ensure that working class women undertake the enormous amounts of unpaid labour the institution of the family entails. Sexual oppression has been a means of reordering and stabilising social relationships in the interests of dominant classes.

Sexual repression, sustained by capitalism, also profoundly shapes our personalities. Marxist theorists who reinterpreted Freud's psychoanalytic theory--notably Reich and Marcuse--identified the key role of sexual repression in maintaining capitalist hierarchies and working class quiescence. Reich argued that sexual repression leads children to develop 'character structures' that inhibit workers' inclination to challenge the existing social order and promote their acceptance of repetitive work over which they have no control.²² For Marcuse, the restriction of sexual drives to a narrow reproductive sexuality, confined to brief periods outside working hours, encourages the sublimation of workers' sexual energy into productive labour.²³ For both theorists, sexual repression involves much more than discrimination against queers; it disposes workers to obedience in the alienated labour of capitalist production.

Sexual oppression in Australian history

Sexual repression is an important pillar of capitalist class structures, hence its importance in the history of white Australia. Perhaps the most common belief about the origins of lesbian and gay oppression is that it is just a hangover from earlier historical periods, the product of bad ideas linked, for example, to the medieval Christian church. Certainly some aspects of the repression of homosexuality in modern societies draw from the repertoire of Christian 'sins' outlawed in the Middle Ages, most notably laws against sodomy and buggery. Yet prosecutions for sodomy were sporadic and generally very rare until the seventeenth century and, until the nineteenth century, these laws both in theory and practice covered a wide range of sexual acts besides those between men and between women, including bestiality and heterosexual anal intercourse. Furthermore, key features of lesbian and gay oppression are distinctly contemporary phenomena. It was only in the late nineteenth century in Britain and Europe that the range of criminalised sexual acts was expanded to include all expressions of sexuality between men. New legal and medical approaches transformed sexual oppression. Previously laws had been designed to suppress particular *acts*, which all sorts of people might commit. Now the concern was to repress a newly invented category of *people*: 'homosexuals'.²⁴ Sexual oppression in its current form is not simply the legal or ideological expression of an unfortunate Western cultural quirk called homophobia, it is the product of industrial capitalism.

The history of sexual oppression in the Australian colonies parallels that in Britain and Europe. In one sense, persecution of homosexuality (at least between men) was inscribed in the new colony from the beginning. In 1787, before the colony of New South Wales was even settled, the soon to be Governor Phillip wrote about two crimes that would merit death: murder and sodomy.²⁵ This reflected an attitude to sodomy between men that had emerged in England to justify greater social control over the new, overworked, overcrowded and disorderly working class.²⁶

Despite Governor Phillip's enthusiasm, however, it was four decades before anti-sodomy laws were systematically implemented in the new colonies. Only in 1828 did the first hangings for sodomy take place in NSW and Van Dieman's Land. The majority of sodomy trials in NSW before the

middle of the nineteenth century happened in just one decade, the 1830s, and the last execution occurred the year before transportation ceased in 1839. In Van Dieman's Land, the penal colony for recalcitrant prisoners from other Australian colonies, where transportation continued longer, the incidence of execution was higher than in NSW and lasted into the 1860s.²⁷ During the 1840s, official reports started moralising about lesbian activity among convict women and there were cases of women being punished for such behaviour in the female prisons.²⁸

This shift in official treatment of same-sex activity among convicts seems to have been precipitated by the rapid expansion of the convict population, particularly during the early 1830s.²⁹ This was a decade of growing ferment, as convicts became more difficult to manage. Prosecutions for sexual activity were part of a general disciplinary crack down: hangings in Sydney reached a record high around 1830, and floggings were administered liberally for minor offences, such as neglect of work.³⁰ At the same time, sections of the British and NSW ruling classes sought to abolish the expensive system of transportation in favour of free settlement, as surplus labourers became a more pressing problem in Britain than the disposal of criminals. Scaremongering about widespread 'depravity' in the convict population supported the case for ending transportation.³¹

Control of convict homosexuality was also an aspect of the colonial rulers' efforts to ensure an orderly assimilation of freed convicts into the emerging working class.³² The authorities regarded marriage as a key part of this process. Consequently they also punished heterosexual extramarital sex among convicts and granted considerable privileges to those who married.³³ This campaign to tighten sexual mores and push people into marriage worked. Up to about 1820, marriage was largely irrelevant to most of the working population. But, thanks to these measures, it was a dominant institution by the 1840s, and the family became a fundamental means of social control and population growth.³⁴ The persecution of homosexual activity between convicts was first used to manage a rapidly expanded convict population and later to transform penal colonies into 'free' societies. This shift from a semi-slave society to one based on 'free' wage labour involved less reliance on the overt repression of chains, the lash and the gallows and more on subtle mechanisms of control, including the family.

From the 1860s until the turn of the century, the colonies developed increasingly sophisticated methods for policing social behaviour. The program to organise the population into families intensified. Pregnant convict women had been seen as a burden by the colonial authorities.³⁵ Without transportation, the colonial ruling classes now saw working class families as crucial if the population was to continue to grow. In the oldest colony, NSW, births easily took over as the main source of population growth once transportation ceased.³⁶ As Henry Parkes stated to the NSW parliament in 1866, 'Our business being to colonize the country, there was only one way to do it-- by spreading over it all the associations and connections of family life.'³⁷

Policy makers also became concerned about working class living conditions and life-styles. They worried that lack of parental supervision of children, poor housing and rising infant mortality rates would threaten the health and discipline of the labour force in the future.³⁸ Sexual morality became an important issue in the push to ensure that the relationships formed by members of the working class met standards of 'decency'. Women's relationships were increasingly controlled by their economic dependence upon men and the social denial of their sexuality.³⁹ Among men, policy makers and police repressed a wide array of 'deviant' sexual activities, along with 'larrikinism'-- associating in groups on the streets and engaging in behaviour offensive to bourgeois morality.⁴⁰ It was during this period, from the mid-1860s to the early 1890s, that colonial governments systematically criminalised men's homosexual activity, with the introduction of provisions for acts of 'indecent assault' or 'gross indecency' between men creating a range of new offences and ensuring easier convictions.⁴¹ As in Britain and Europe, criminalisation of male homosexuality was part of a process of organising the working class into respectable heterosexual nuclear families.

From the 1920s, a thriving underground 'camp' scene emerged in the major cities. But the 1950s witnessed another serious crackdown against male homosexuality in Australia. This was again an element in a campaign to reinforce the nuclear family. The years following the Second World War saw a drive to consolidate the family, encourage women to have children and push them out of unconventional war-time jobs, so that there would be positions for returned soldiers. The campaign against homosexuality in the 1950s was an escalation of this process, seeking to rectify the decline in social discipline that conservatives argued had occurred during the war.⁴² Over a few years, there was a sharp increase in the number of people charged with and convicted of homosexual offences. Police actively entrapped homosexual men.⁴³ A special squad targeting homosexuality was set up in the Victorian police and the NSW police superintendent labelled homosexuality 'the greatest social menace facing Australia'.⁴⁴ Homosexuals in the public service became particular targets. There were moves to isolate homosexual men in NSW prisons and to have them locked up in mental institutions.⁴⁵ The tabloid press was filled with scandals about gay men. What little coverage there was in the quality press sent a clear message to anyone thinking of straying from the heterosexual norm: that path could lead only to shame and arrest.⁴⁶

Far from there being consistent victimisation of homosexuals, which one would expect if it was the consequence of a cultural logic inherited from an earlier era, those in power have varied the intensity of sexual oppression to suit their needs. Churches have been complicit in this oppression, but they have not been the driving force behind it. In fact, the laws against homosexuality in the late nineteenth century were introduced when the state was reducing its support for the established Anglican church and its influence was in decline.⁴⁷ The repression of homosexual behaviour in Australia has been an important and increasingly sophisticated tool used by the state to discipline the working population, convict and free, and to encourage the working class to reproduce.

Fighting back

In contrast to the dimly repressive atmosphere of the 1950s, the subsequent decades witnessed a flourishing of lesbian and gay activism. Increasingly bold civil liberties groups emerged in the 1960s to argue for homosexual law reform.⁴⁸ With the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, during which lesbians, gay men and other sexual minorities fought back against police harassment, Gay Liberation exploded on the scene, spreading to Australia in subsequent years. Growing out of the broad radicalisation of Australian society--expressed in rising levels of strike action, the struggles against the Vietnam war and the development of women's liberation--the movement's organic relationship with the emerging new left lent it a critical edge. In contrast to earlier groups, activists in Gay Liberation regarded society's treatment of gay men and lesbians not just as a kind of discrimination, but as a deeply rooted form of oppression, intimately intertwined with other forms of capitalist oppression and exploitation. The choice of the word 'liberation' was significant--militants in this movement sought nothing less than the overthrow of society's restrictions on expressions of sexuality and gender, and the institutions that supported this repression.⁴⁹ The radical movement thrived on and off campuses, and the first celebrations of gay pride took place in 1973. The struggles the movement waged during the early 1970s prompted public opinion to shift dramatically in favour of lesbians and gay men.⁵⁰

There was another upsurge in struggle in the last years of this decade. The police attack on the first Mardi Gras in Sydney and arrest of 53 people, on 24 June 1978, was crucial. The Mardi Gras was part of a day of international gay solidarity. The arrests sparked a major campaign which focussed public attention on the movement against sexual oppression. Protestors took to the streets across Australia over subsequent months, and Sydney witnessed its largest ever protests for lesbian and gay rights. Although 130 more people were arrested, the campaign succeeded in making the arrests a national political issue. By December 1979, the NSW government had dropped all the charges and liberalised its protest permit laws.⁵¹ Meanwhile, the Festival of Light, a right wing Christian group, had organised a tour of British 'morals campaigner' Mary Whitehouse for September 1978. Gay

and women's liberation activists organised small but frequent demonstrations calling for an end to anti-homosexual discrimination and anti-abortion laws wherever she spoke. They succeeded in keeping her audiences small. The Festival of Light reported a significant financial loss as a result, leaving them thousands of dollars in debt.⁵²

Many working class lesbian and gay activists recognised that their class position shaped their experience of discrimination. They began to organise as workers, fighting for their unions to oppose discrimination against them in the workplace. The unions of teachers, social workers, public service clerical workers and plumbers were among the first to take up the issue.⁵³ In 1978, the Victorian Gay Teachers and Students Group produced a booklet for release in schools, 'Young, Gay, and Proud'. Its sympathetic and positive spin on homosexuality was groundbreaking and the booklet was very popular.⁵⁴ Lesbian and gay workers formed gay trade union groups in Sydney and Melbourne, and marched as contingents in the May Day marches.⁵⁵ In the last years of the 1970s, the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations (the peak body of white-collar unions) adopted anti-discrimination policies and convened a national meeting on homosexual workers.⁵⁶

By the early 1980s, however, the movement had fractured. Radical activists continued to theorise the relationship between capitalism, lesbian and gay struggles, and other forms of oppression. But serious political differences emerged about the best strategy to adopt during an increasingly conservative period, as levels of social struggle turned down. Some argued for a turn towards the emerging gay communities and moderation of political radicalism. Others advocated a more critical approach to the communities and the need for a continued orientation to activism and, in particular, to the working class.⁵⁷ Overall, the numbers of people active around lesbian and gay issues declined sharply. Gay liberation as a movement effectively disappeared.⁵⁸

From the early 1980s, many gay activists became involved in combatting the AIDS epidemic and efforts by conservatives to use it to roll back acceptance of queers. They helped shape one of the most effective responses to AIDS in the world. The approach of the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments, to treat the issue as fundamentally about public health rather than an opportunity to attack homosexuals, was also important. But Labor's cooption of activists into consultative bodies and public institutions also reinforced the conservatising effects of the down-turn in social struggles amongst politically involved queers. The direct-action approach of ACTUP in its campaigns over the rights of HIV-positive people was, in part, a reaction against this process.⁵⁹

Sporadic struggles since the 1980s brought about further changes in legislation that discriminated against homosexuals. The campaign in the 1990s to decriminalise male homosexual acts in Tasmania, one of the last Australian jurisdictions to reform its laws, included protests, civil disobedience and consumer boycotts. Tasmania now has some of the most progressive relationship laws in the world.⁶⁰

Gay Liberation and later campaigns by queer militants achieved a great deal. Lesbians and gay men still experienced disadvantages at work, under the law and in society as a whole. But the movement had won recognition for lesbians and gays, and a significant change in public opinion about homosexuality had taken place.⁶¹ Along with the fight for women's liberation, these struggles had shifted attitudes to the family. It was no longer possible to argue that heterosexual monogamy and the nuclear family were universal. The struggles of activists were crucial in changing the political climate, opening the way for governments to decriminalise homosexuality and introduce anti-discrimination and same-sex relationship legislation. But the ultimate goal of sexual liberation--the capacity to form relationships free from control by the state, the dominance of the family and the constraints imposed by the ruling ideologies of homophobia and sexism--remains.

Queers, class and sexual liberation

Many of the problems that affected the late gay liberation movement are still apparent today. The priority given by most activists to building lesbian and gay communities that began in the 1980s continues. Political campaigns are often limited to the lobbying activities of lesbian and gay rights groups. The queer activism that emerged in universities during the 1990s tended to be much more radical, but was limited by its identity politics--the belief that queers have common interests, regardless of class, and that subjective perceptions are very much more important than objective circumstances in organising against oppression. Recognition of the links between exploitation and oppression, queer struggles and class struggle receded.

Many lesbians and gay men think that queer communities can overcome the social and political isolation and discrimination that they experience. Such communities do provide an important source of support. But, for cultural, geographical and financial reasons, they are more accessible to middle class lesbians and gay men than to members of the working class. If coming out of the closet may mean alienating family, friends and coworkers, or you live outside inner city suburbs or don't have the money for an up-market lifestyle, then it is harder to participate in the gay milieu.⁶²

The promotion of the 'pink dollar'--the idea that queers have a high disposable income and should be seen as potentially valuable customers--is frequently considered as a key means to gain mainstream acceptance.⁶³ Yet, contrary to the assumption that lesbians and especially gay men are more likely to be affluent than heterosexuals, the available Australian evidence suggests that the situation is much more complicated. Over half of all women who identify as homosexual have above average incomes but, overall, women who report same-sex attraction or experience are much more likely to have low incomes than heterosexual women. Men who identify as homosexual are less likely than heterosexual men to have very low incomes, but those reporting same-sex attraction are more likely to be in the lowest income range.⁶⁴ This suggests that low incomes play a significant role in preventing women and men who are attracted to the same sex from identifying as lesbian or gay. This, in turn, is likely to undermine a sense of belonging to lesbian and gay communities amongst those who are not 'out'.

Even where working class queers identify with their community, their class position shapes their experiences of it. This is not only a question of their ability to consume what the community offers. The interests of workers and bosses in queer-owned businesses are diametrically opposed, just as they are in society at large. Fear of persecution outside the queer community can lead queer workers to accept lower pay or worse conditions in order to work within the community. Queer bosses profit from this, while lower wages for queers tend to undermine the conditions of heterosexual workers. Identity politics--the idea that class is less important than sexual identity in shaping political concerns--papers over these core differences. It suggests that working class queers have more in common with the lesbian or gay business owners who profit from their labour than with sympathetic heterosexual workers who ultimately have no stake in perpetuating sexual oppression.

More fundamentally, an uncritical approach to lesbian and gay communities ignores the way sexual oppression serves the interests of the capitalist class. Solidarity with other workers rather than ruling class lesbians and gay men is needed to challenge sexual oppression and the capitalist organisation of production and reproduction that sustains it. While it is often argued that members of the working class are, on the whole, too homophobic to fight for the welfare of lesbian and gay workers, there has been a long history of labour movement support for lesbian and gay rights.⁶⁵ For example, when a gay activist was expelled from a residential college at Macquarie University in 1973 and later when a lesbian student's teaching scholarship was revoked, the left wing Builders Labourers' Federation banned construction on the campus. Notwithstanding the macho culture of the union, workers had no hesitation about taking industrial action.⁶⁶ Similarly, when a gay man was evicted from Melbourne University's Graduate House in 1979, university café workers from the

Liquor and Allied Trades Union held a stopwork meeting in solidarity, threatening further action until he was allowed to return.⁶⁷ When they act together, workers--gay, lesbian and straight--have vastly greater power than queers do on their own.

The dominance of identity politics through the 1980s and 1990s has, in recent years, begun to break down. Queers formed contingents in Australian mobilisations that were part of the international movement against corporate globalisation, notably the Melbourne blockade of the World Economic Forum on 11 September 2000. When, in 2002, plans for a new union building at Victoria University lacked space to replace the queer room, queer students turned to the construction union for support. A basic sense of justice prompted workers to ban construction until the university administration gave way.⁶⁸ These developments indicate an awareness of the connection between class interests and sexual oppression.

The struggle against sexual oppression has not occurred in isolation. The broader radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular the gains of the women's liberation movement, have led to changes in sexual relationships. Yet sexual oppression still plays a central part in maintaining the kinds of social relationships crucial to capitalism. Even though lesbians and gay men currently enjoy many of the rights of heterosexuals, maintaining the second class status of lesbian and gay relationships makes it harder for people to form same-sex relationships and helps enforce heterosexuality. This is the underlying issue in debates about gay marriage, particularly the argument that legalising it would undermine traditional marriage.⁶⁹ Although the consequences are exaggerated by bigots, gay marriage could indeed help to undermine traditional marriage, by removing one of the ways in which the heterosexual family is made to seem exclusively desirable and natural. Furthermore, unpaid labour in the family relies heavily on a division of labour between women, as the primary child rearers, and men, as the primary breadwinners. Queer families can undercut people's conscious and unconscious acceptance of sex-role stereotypes by providing striking examples of women and men in 'opposite' roles.

Maintaining heterosexuality as the norm involves imposing it on young people. As a result, some of the most enduring forms of discrimination against lesbians and gay men involve restricting their contact with children. Denying state support for lesbians and gay men to become parents, for example by refusing IVF or adoption rights, and placing restrictions on lesbian and gay teachers, are aspects of this process. Limiting the relationships that children can have with lesbians or gay men, often by making the false accusation that queers are a greater threat to children than straight people, makes it more difficult for them to understand sexuality in any but narrow heterosexual terms. It also reinforces the effects of compulsory heterosexuality on their personality structures and hence their acceptance of capitalist hierarchies.

The links between class and queer struggles have sometimes been indirect. Nonetheless, class it is still central to understanding this movement. Gay liberation grew out of the radicalisation of the 1960s and 1970s, which included high strike rates. Lesbians and gay men were involved in fighting in their unions and workers have organised against sexual oppression. Class position makes a significant difference to queers' experiences of their communities and many of the gains made have mainly benefited middle rather than working class lesbians and gay men. Most importantly, sexual liberation is not possible as long as the ruling class gains advantages from controlling workers' sexuality. Sexual oppression is more than simply the marginalisation of a particular group. It is the systematic restructuring of social relationships--and our humanity--to serve the interests of a ruling minority. Fighting for sexual liberation means fighting for a sexuality freed from the distorting influences of capitalism.

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