Technology Is Making Queers Of Us All

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So long as lesbians and gay men are unable to legally marry, adopt children and serve in the military it is pretty clear that they will remain second class citizens in countries forbidding them these everyday rituals of conventional citizenship. They will be singled out instead for special discrimination, legally vulnerable to exploitation and attack, andconstantly exposed to culturally sanctioned violence. These liberal arguments for lesbian and gay civil liberties are widely known by now and, thankfully, appear as well to be ever more widely affirmed.

But in this piece I mean to argue for a different and deeper queer politics than the liberal politics of lesbian and gay rights, a politics that connects the contemporary political struggles of queer people with the politics of disruptive technological change. Ultimately, I think that the efforts to secure lesbians and gay men the right to marry their lovers or to fight in wars (to the extent that these are separable activities) will come to be viewed as stepping stones along political and cultural paths that brought humanity to far more subversive places. Queerer places.

Assimilationist Straightjacket

I'm a gay man, I suppose, and so I stand to benefit, I suppose, from victories in the struggle for basic gay rights. And yet, I have to admit, I find it difficult to get too enthusiastic about these rights in anything more than a very abstract way.

The right to adopt kids? No thanks! My idea of parenting would more likely involve the little dumpling hibernating a couple of decades in a Borg maturation chamber. The right to blow up my nation's official foes on some foreign field? Count me on the side of the conscientious objectors. I'm more than half hoping the labcoats will soon discover some nice genetic or neurochemical tweak to meliorate the manly mania for war altogether.

Conventional gay politics is predicated on the assumption that lesbians and gay men represent a stable and recognizable minority population. Although this minority is unfairly and irrationally stigmatized its members are otherwise indistinguishable from a likewise stable and recognizable majority "straight" population. And so if we could simply eliminate the various legal and cultural stigmas that bedevil them then we could welcome these gay unfortunates into the fold.

There is, of course, a kernel of truth in this observation, but something about it just fails to inspire. Although this oversimplifies matters, I've noticed that in practice the vision of an "assimilationist" normalizing gay politics amounts altogether too often to little more than white gay men recognizing that the existence of homophobia is all that stands in the way of their enjoyment of the privileges to which racist patriarchal capitalism otherwise would "entitle" them.

Queer politics, on the contrary, are predicated on the assumption that what is not "normal" should nevertheless often be valued and celebrated. Queer sensibilities tend to be supremely suspicious of the gay vision of equality and normality, and are drawn instead to visions of diversity and proliferation. From the perspective of queer politics it is no surprise that gay assimilationist politics devotes almost equal energy to criticizing homophobia as it does to policing the bounds of "appropriate" expression within gay communities —- castigating drag queens for their conspicuousness in pride parades, say, or gay youths for their promiscuity.

But while gay assimilationists may want to represent the latest in along line of "natural" minorities demanding fair treatment before the law, there is something about a minority defined by the notorious restlessness and instability of desire, something that defies the easy assumption of the mantle of naturalness and normality. And this remains true even if we manage to locate

a disposition to certain desires and not others in just the right hormone balance or endocrine environment.

If queer politics self-consciously refuses to value normality over the proliferating forms that desire takes in the world, you see a grudging expression of the same impulse in the inability of the advocates of conventional gay politics to definitively designate the actual community in whose name they would presumably make their demand for natural equality.

The gay community is notoriously more than a "gay community," being as well the "lesbian and gay community," the "lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered community" and so on. The membership list is and remains provocatively open-ended, as does queer politics itself —-ready to accommodate as well the sensibilities, problems and demands of sex radicals and "metrosexuals," body-modification communities and punks of every description.

In this open-endedness I see more than an inability of queer politics to comfortably locate itself within the frame of normal liberal identity politics. I see instead a successor to the ambitiousness of identity politics.

The Future's So Queer, I Gotta Give Shade

Donna Haraway, whose socialist-feminist "Manifesto for Cyborgs" is a key technoprogressive text, once quipped that she "would rather go to bed with a cyborg than with a sensitive man." Although the desire she expressed in this phrase does not necessarily amount to a "same-sex" desire, in the conventional construal (which is, let's face it, awfully misleading anyway – as if the desires we call "same-sex" desires aren't usually driven by the sexualization of salient differences anyway) there is something unmistakably queer about it, something that begins to suggest an appealing convergence between where queer politics are going and where I think "posthumanisms" are going and, hence, what I think technoprogressive politics might be up to.

Technoprogressive posthumanisms tend to consist, in a nutshell, of two attitudes. One attitude is "negative," or critical, and the other "positive," or programmatic. As a critical project, technoprogressive posthumanism names a relentless refusal of the always antidemocratic politics of nostalgia and a deep suspicion of all normative and ideological claims made in the name of "nature" or "the natural." This suspicion is inspired, among other things, by a sensitivity to the destabilizing impact of radical technological developments on our sense of lived limits, capacities and standards. As a "positive" program, technoprogressive posthumanism names a hope that we can increase the sum of human freedom by embracing the emerging possibilities for the genetic, prosthetic and cognitive modification of our minds, bodies, and assumptions, so long as we struggle to ensure that technodevelopmental costs, risks, and benefits are all fairly shared by all the stakeholders to global technological change.

While it is easy to see that the queer suspicion of claims made in the name of "nature" is obviously correlated to posthumanist perspectives on the world, I think it should be just as clear that technoprogressive hopes for technologically deepening democracy and proliferating morphological freedom are also queer forms that desire is taking in the world.

For one thing, it is no coincidence that transsexuals represent the radical front line in both queer and technoprogressive political struggles. The radical genetic, prosthetic and cognitive modification of our bodies—- whatever forms they take or will come to take —- inspires both fears and fantasies that the anemic liberal tolerance of differences that don't really make a difference

can never hope to accommodate. Pat Califia has said that "being a sex radical means being defiant as well as deviant." To the extent that every individual project of morphological freedom will be an essay in which we rewrite ourselves in the image of our desires, Califia's definition of sex radicalism is going to apply to posthuman practices of radical body modification far more generally.

I would hope that technoprogressive and posthumanist sensibilities will come to look to classic queer texts for inspiration as they confront the unique quandaries of the ongoing collision of new hopes and desires with inherited values and institutions, when sometimes they seem now to limit their reading to dry technical and philosophical manuals. You'll know technoprogressive culture is really getting somewhere when Virginia Woolf's Orlando or Gore Vidal's Myra Breckenridge are as widely read by technoprogressive types as are policy papers on molecular manufacturing, peer-to-peer networks, longevity medicine, sustainable urban infrastructure, or space elevators.

Oscar Wilde's subversively satirical "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" and Valerie Solanas's parodic "SCUM Manifesto" are two more examples of texts that seem to me to speak exactly equally to queer as well as to posthumanist suspicions and hopes. These two raving rants share not only the immediately recognizable technoprogressive premise that only through radical technological development can humanity attain political emancipation, but also use (and subversively abuse) the language and impulses of science to create entertainments in which conventional categories begin to illuminate the world in profoundly unconventional ways. These texts pretend to be itineraries for the achievement of freedom, but actually they manage to create the vertiginous experience of freedom for just as long as the reader inhabits them, carving out literary spaces in which desire and self-creation can make their play for a time.

An Army of Lovers Can Never Fail

"I am scared of the unknown and I love it," writes Kathy Acker in her novel In Memoriam to Identity. "This is my sexuality." This profoundly queer attitude names something that will be familiar to many technoprogressives, I am guessing, in their attitude toward the futures opening up before us.

Sometimes the demands of political organizing can make the politics of stable circumscribable identity seem appealing or even inevitable. Perhaps queers and geeks and technoprogressives sometimes want to circle the wagons and ward off the ridicule of those whose imaginations fail to reach as far as our own sometimes do. Perhaps we are sometimes exasperated by the time and effort that attaches to interminably negotiating differences, especially when the struggle to resist bioconservative movements that would perniciously police technology and social forms back to predemocratic limits seems so urgent instead.

Perhaps we can sometimes acquire resources more easily or generate enthusiasm more readily in "movements" that offer their "members" a feeling of shared identity, of "belonging," rather than just a welter of specific campaigns and contingent political coalitions. But I think we learn decisively from queer cultures that the politics of desire never issues out in a sufficiently shared identity in whose name political claims can properly be made for long.

The suspicions and the hopes posthumanisms hold for the still unknown futures before us are too general to crystallize into a widely shared, stable identity and yet too specific to provide general guidance for living. There is no one way to be posthuman. There is no one shared specific

posthuman project. There is no universally shared history, no inevitable conversion experience, no truly canonical text. Cyborgs, like queers, may well want to turn to more promiscuous models of public intercourse for their political inspiration.

For queers who are bored with a vision of politics limited to the provision of rights to marry, adopt children and do battle, I will recommend to your attention the fledgling politics of posthumanisms which unite technological development with human self-creation in the hope of unleashing varieties of desire queers themselves have rarely (but sometimes) dreamt of.

For technoprogressives and posthumanists who are looking for wider cultural contexts and connections to help make sense of your struggles, I will recommend to your attention a century or so of radical queer writing and activism, which helped carve the way for your efforts and provide you with probable allies you definitely need right about now.

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