

From Inclusion to Resistance

Neither Trump's Trans Ban nor Assimilation, but Total Liberation

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Well-meaning allies and earnest trans activists responded with dismay to Trump's announcement that transgender people are to be banned from military service once more, recognizing it as a rollback of LGBT inclusion. Behind the scenes, however, some of us reacted with relief: *at least we don't have to worry about being drafted for some rich man's war*. Do we really want to legitimize the US military in return for the forms of legitimacy that are now being taken from us? How does this question sit in the decades-long history of LGBT struggles? And what does it mean that this question is returning to the fore right now?

To allies: the best way you can support trans people is by ensuring that none of us ever has to join the army in the first place. Help us fight for access to health care, community, camaraderie, self-respect, and options for survival that don't come at the expense of others' survival. We shouldn't have to hire on as mercenaries for the biggest armed gang in the world to get those things.

To others in the trans community: the best way we can fight for our own liberation and the liberation of all people is to create a world in which the US military does not and cannot exist. When we legitimize the US military, we are legitimizing the very weapons that politicians like Trump will employ against us. The purpose of institutions like the US military is to impose control by means of coercive force; they have always been used against those on the margins of society. Participating in these institutions is no way to achieve self-determination: the stronger they are, the less assured our own freedom will be.

Liberation, not Assimilation

As in the same-sex marriage debate, every "right" that we would supposedly gain from the right to serve in the military is either not worth having or something that everyone should have without having to join the army. If you need health care, you shouldn't have to marry someone to get it; if you need a scholarship to college, you shouldn't have to pledge to kill people to get it. On both of these issues, mainstream LGBT activists missed the opportunity to talk about the deeper issues that connect all of us—issues that put us in conflict with our rulers, offering the possibility of real social transformation.

Here's an example. The Trump Administration began their assault on the late-blooming liberalism of Obama's trans-inclusive policies by rolling back some of the recommendations regarding bathroom access for transgender students in public schools. The way that students are forced into one of two standardized bathrooms—learning gender difference through this process of sorting and segregation—reproduces in miniature the ways that the school system categorizes, restricts, and shoves *everyone* down different paths along lines of identity. The wealthy and obedient are shot upwards into a life of advanced degrees and student loan debt, while the rest slip into the pipeline to prison or service work drudgery. Whatever its apologists say, school serves to sort us into a hierarchical society and to train us to accept authority.

What's radical about trans students contesting bathroom and gender assignment is the possibilities this opens for *all* students to contest authority. If we don't accept their rules regarding which toilets to use, why should we accept the legitimacy of the system that functions as a school-to-prison pipeline? While we support anything that can reduce the misery of trans kids, we also recognize that trans-inclusive bathroom policies are a safety valve intended to divert student resistance and to bolster the legitimacy of a failing public school system. As with marriage and

the military, trans liberation in schools isn't just a question of easing our inclusion into them. It would demand something more like dismantling them altogether.

It's strategic for defenders of the status quo to re-center the LGBT rights debate around trans people in the military at this moment. As transgender, genderqueer, and non-binary communities are appearing in mass media and popular consciousness in unprecedented numbers, an optimist might speculate that US gender relations could come up for renegotiation—along with all the institutions they undergird. What better way to protect those relations and institutions than by reducing the scope of the discussion to the most reactionary formulation possible: integration into the military?

It's better for both liberals and conservatives that we stop talking about radically reconfiguring health care, sexuality, education, the economy, and numerous other social institutions shot through with patriarchal norms. Those conversations could put *anything* on the table. If we can keep trans people and their supporters fighting for the “right” to kill America's enemies abroad, we won't have to worry as much about them undermining American institutions at home.

From Liberation to Inclusion

Let's look at how gay and lesbian people have related to military exclusion in the past. This history may offer useful insights for transgender people today.

The first formal gay rights demonstrations in US history took place in the spring of 1965 at the White House, Civil Service Commission, State Department, and the Pentagon. Activists from what was then called the homophile movement picketed and leafleted in protest against the exclusion of homosexuals from federal employment in the armed forces, State Department, and other government bureaucracies.

Inspired by the civil rights movement, these demonstrations reflected a new “militancy” on the part of a previously timid community. But these genteel pickets neither captured the attention of the homosexuals on whose behalf they were ostensibly organized nor influenced the government to change its policies of exclusion. As the war in Vietnam escalated, protesting to be *included* in the US war machine attracted little sympathy from social movements increasingly fighting to prevent young people from being trapped within it.

By 1969, younger gays and lesbians inspired by the New Left and youth countercultures were articulating a dramatically different politics around homosexuality and the military. For instance, a gay theater collective in Berkeley staged a performance riffing off of Muhammad Ali's defiant critique of war, titled, “No Vietnamese Ever Called Me a Queer.” Early Gay Liberation Front groups offered counseling to young men around how to navigate local draft boards in relation to their sexuality. One notorious collective in Oakland parked a van outside an induction center and offered incoming draftees blowjobs, then provided them with photographic evidence of their ineligibility for military service.

These gay liberationists didn't aspire to win inclusion for a homosexual minority in established heterosexist institutions within a framework of equality. They saw themselves as the vanguard of a struggle to unlock the capacity for same-sex love possible in all people. They believed that this love could undermine militarism by replacing the fear, hatred, and violence promoted by a patriarchal society with affection, desire, and a recognition of common interests. From late 1969

onwards, gay liberation intertwined critically with the anti-war movement, challenging its sexist and homophobic tendencies while deepening its vision of peace and international solidarity.

By the mid-1970s, however, internal divisions had isolated most of the gay liberation front groups. Lesbians gravitated towards feminist organizing while gay male activists pursued an increasingly single-issue agenda. Yet the anti-militarist roots of gay liberation remained; when Leonard Matlovich made headlines after coming out as gay and fighting his discharge from the Army, some gays and lesbians offered support, while others condemned the campaign as a betrayal of the ideals of gay liberation. Lesbians flocked to the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s, while lesbians and gay men took active roles in Latin American solidarity struggles, continuing to link sexual and gender liberation with resistance to militarism.

However, by the 1990s, the politics of assimilation seemed triumphant. Many fiery young LGBT activists targeted ROTCs on college campuses, but most framed their campaigns as anti-discrimination efforts rather than making common cause with those who suffered at the hands of the US war machine. By the time gays, lesbians, and bisexuals were allowed to enlist openly, few voices within the mainstream LGBT movement challenged this “progressive” development. With “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” repealed, gay and lesbian liaison units flourishing in urban police departments, and federal non-discrimination statutes in place in most government bureaucracies, the full integration of sexual minorities into the repressive power of the state seemed at hand.

From Inclusion to Resistance

Times have changed again. While older gay and lesbian community leaders continue to champion pro-police and pro-military lines, younger queer and trans generations increasingly not only reject but actively resist these politics. Queer and trans millennials have taken active roles in Black Lives Matter, protests against police violence, and anti-deportation resistance. Pride festivals this summer have been wracked with controversy between younger radicals who want to minimize or exclude police and older generations who want to collaborate with law enforcement.

We see evidence of the radicals’ success in eroding pro-police LGBT politics in the escalating social media campaigns by police intended to position them as protectors and allies of LGBT people. Trump attempted to capitalize on this sentiment after the Pulse massacre, when he attempted to shift the focus away from anti-queer violence towards “radical Islamic terrorism” and the need for an ever more repressive state to target migrants, Muslims, and “bad guys.” Yet substantial queer and trans participation in anti-Trump demonstrations and organizing reflect a widespread rejection of this effort to turn attention towards scapegoats and away from state power.

As a result, Trump has decided that the LGBT constituency is expendable. It was already essentially lost to him, with the exception of those gay men and a few lesbians who identify more with the interests of capital and the state than with others like themselves. He’ll lose virtually no support from anyone who might have previously favored him for his anti-trans move, and he’ll shore up his support from the far right—the proponents of escalating repression. With his popular legitimacy flagging under Russia scandals and legislative ineffectuality, he hopes to stabilize his power from the top down by consolidating his relationship with the forces that directly carry out coercive violence. We see something similar in Turkey, with Erdogan’s purge of the

army paving the way for his seizure of increasingly centralized power—or in Russia, with Putin’s anti-gay laws serving as a bone thrown to the Orthodox Church.

So perhaps it isn’t useful to understand Trump’s move simply as an instance of transphobia. Trump is merely making calculations about how best to keep the sinking ship of his administration afloat. He is treating us like Muslims, like Mexicans, like any demographic he computes to be vulnerable to scapegoating. At least with Christian conservatives, we can depend on the consistent ideological zealotry; with Trump, all that matters is power. That’s why he visits the CIA headquarters on his first day of office; that’s why he throws trans people under the bus.

He has grasped something that is becoming more and more apparent around the world, from Egypt to Turkey to Venezuela: governments come and go, but whoever controls the deep state wields the power that determines our daily lives. This state of affairs cannot be remedied by elections, but only by revolution.

And that’s why today, every important social movement begins from a basic opposition to the violence of the state. Whether people are responding to the monotony of pointless work enforced by debt and rising rents, or the constant policing and harassment and surveillance that structure more and more of our lives, or the imposition of destructive development upon the ecosystems we depend on, the result is the same. When our precarious lives become too miserable, we reach a boiling point. Invariably, the flashpoint takes the form of a reaction against police or military control.

We’ve seen this over and over the past ten years, from Athens to Ankara, from Ferguson to Standing Rock. City, state, and federal police, the National Guard, and US soldiers, not to mention infiltrators and informants, have been instrumental over the past few years in preventing people in the United States from seizing back cities, halting pipelines, and ending state violence. Yet despite the overwhelming force at their disposal, the authorities know as well as we do that force alone won’t hold this regime together forever.

Transgender people today are at a crossroads. Which side of the barricades will we be on? Will we be letting our commanding officer know which pronoun we prefer them to use as they order us to shoot tear gas canisters at our neighbors? Or will we be joining everyone who hungers for the freedom to determine our lives, our genders, our sexualities, and our futures together, as we see fit, outside the boxes offered to us by enlistment forms and cellblocks?

The decision is up to us.

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