

For a revolutionary queer movement.

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Current context

The current condition of queer communities is paradoxically one of the best and one of the worst we've seen in modern capitalist Western societies. Sixty years of continuous mobilization by the queer movement (and protoqueer before it, if we consider all the developments of the gay and lesbian movements) have led to the legalization and almost total emancipation of our communities within the bourgeois state legal system. We can now, as never before, exist openly within society, putting on our true faces. Yet material violence against the most marginalized parts of our communities has only increased in the last decade; among them our black, indigenous, trans, homeless, sex-worker and mentally alienated siblings.

While Montreal and the rest of the province have been bastions of the mainstream gay movement, at least since the days of the Sex Garage raid (July 1990), we've also seen the new extreme transphobic movement emerging from the Anglo-Saxon world take root here. While we were relatively unaffected by these attacks until recently, our neighbours to the south have been confronted for the past three years with the emergence of a veritable policy of eliminating trans communities, involving elements of recriminalization, the reappearance of a strong demonization discourse, a new ideological wave and direct violence.

The picture that emerges is one of a phenomenon that seems to contradict itself, with increased integration into the legal and societal system building alongside a wave of strong reaction ignored or even encouraged by the ruling class.

Historical context

This paradoxical situation of rights gains and rising violence in North American societies is by no means new.

It was already apparent at the emergence of the AIDS crisis, as a result of the usurpation of the leadership of radical activists by assimilationists and the gay bourgeoisie. Shortly after the Stonewall riots (1969), the gay, cis, white and affluent communities led a campaign to eject members of the most ostracized and revolutionary communities that had emerged. We recall the gay movement's treatment of Sylvia Rivera (1951-2002), a revolutionary trans and racialized activist generally regarded as one of the mothers of the gay, queer and transfeminist movements. In deed, she was one of the co-founders of the Gay Liberation Front and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionary (STAR).

“You all tell me, go and hide my tail between my legs.

I will no longer put up with this shit.

I have been beaten.

I have had my nose broken.

I have been thrown in jail.

I have lost my job.

I have lost my apartment.

For gay liberation, and you all treat me this way?

What the f**k's wrong with you all?

Think about that!"

- Sylvia Rivera, making a statement during the third annual "pride" (then known as the Christopher Street Liberation Day March) after being booed by a mostly cis and affluent crowd.

The political objectives of the gay assimilationist movement, then made up of the most bourgeois and reactionary elements of our communities, were centred around legalization and assimilation into the dominant cisheteropatriarchal society. This is what characterizes assimilationism as a political movement. This movement, which is routinely the major political force in our communities, aims for acceptance into cishetero society and the attainment of a legal status similar to that of straight people. At a deeper level, what emerges is the pursuit of a straight life despite a gay sexuality. Their strategies usually involve lobbying, accumulating capital in pink businesses, raising awareness and erasing elements of our communities that might offend straights' sensibilities.

Even so, these decades of moderate, even progressive liberal politics led to gains, recuperating the impulse of the 1969 rioters in different ways. By the late 1970s, the community had more rights and comforts than before Stonewall. Yet the conservative backlash was already emerging, and when the AIDS crisis exploded in the 1980s, this homophobic force descended mercilessly on the community. Media, political, legislative and physical violence escalated until a radical queer movement re-emerged. Act Up was undoubtedly the best-known element. With its symbolic attacks on corporations, churches and government bodies, this group adopted a systemic, socio-political analysis of the AIDS crisis. It was in the wake of the group's outbursts and the repoliticization of gay and lesbian issues¹ that we saw the emergence of new, more radical political movements in the 80s and 90s. It was in this context that the very notion of the queer movement was born. Detaching itself from a purely identity-based understanding (male and female homosexual movement) by repositioning itself above all on a common oppression within the cisheteropatriarchy, the queer movement constituted itself as a combative force, capable of attacking the dominant system as much as the oppressive elements within the community. However, the period of celebration following the AIDS crisis in the 1990s and the new legal protection of communities put an end to this political effervescence (also accompanied by strategic dissension within the movements) and saw the assimilationist order and the leadership of the gay bourgeoisie re-established.

The 1990s and 2000s saw their fair share of radical queer and gay movements. In Montreal, we can think of the mobilizations that followed the Sex Garage raid (in 1990), the Pink Panthers (2002 to 2007), the Pervers/Cité festival (since 2008), or the first P!nk Bloc (2010-2016). These various movements are creating a much stronger climate of acceptance in our communities, and anchoring queer issues as a political movement in their own right on the Quebec landscape. These movements have experienced their own exhaustion, internal dissension and/or drift towards bourgeois opportunism, careerism, assimilationism, legalism and the ejection of radical and doubly oppressed elements. At the start of the 2020s, it's clear that there's no queer force to be reckoned with in Quebec's political landscape.

¹ At the time, we were talking about the gay and lesbian movement, the notion of the queer movement being born in those years, and the trans movement having largely been erased or supplanted in that period.

In the USA, another important movement of this period is Queers Bash Back, which emerged during the 2007 election campaign. This informal network of radical anarchist and anti-fascist queer groups created an autonomous, pluriform anarcho-queer tradition in North America, which although extremely marginal, was able to make itself the bad conscience of assimilationists. Functionally extinct, the movement prefigured today's radical queer and trans movements in many ways.

At the time of the new wave of current reactionary attacks, the community is therefore largely dominated politically by gay business, academics and a whole movement of bourgeois and politicians who tell us that their position of power and privilege is the best thing that ever happened to us collectively.

Yet for years we've been sensing something rumbling in queer youth. Away from the village, the drag races and the clean fags of television, in corners of the internet, on the street or in queer apartments and parties where the most marginal of the marginalized meet, a new, angrier, stranger and more disinterested in legality movement is taking shape. The question now is how to turn it into a real political force.

Revolutionary necessity

We are now facing the consequences of this process. Our rights are greater, our identities more accepted, but our capacity to challenge and attack power and reactionaries has diminished. Inclusion in the legal framework of bourgeois liberalism is accompanied by a heavy tendency towards depoliticization. Deprived of queer, radical and revolutionary political spaces, we have sunk into the individualism and atomization promoted by assimilationists. Work, consume, suck cock if you want, but keep your mouth shut. The erosion of our collective capacity to act is concealed by the increased representation of our identities in the media: the popularity of drag in mainstream culture, tourism in the Village and fashionable queer venues, presence on TV and in the cinema, etc. All this representation serves, however, first and foremost, to highlight our identity as queers. All this representation, however, serves above all the interests of the gay bourgeoisie and paints a target on the rest of us. By inscribing us in the collective imagination without materially addressing any of our issues, this representation makes us an ideal target for reactionary forces. Our existences still disturb many, but this representation gives the illusion of a force within the capitalist system that makes us a perfect enemy or target for fascism.

The invention of the notorious "trans lobby", a prime-time scarecrow in the right-wing media, appears to emulate the strategies of 20th-century anti-Semitic conspiracy-mongering. The solution, of course, is not to oppose these new positive representations of our communities, which have their share of interesting aspects, nor of course to challenge our new legal rights, but we must admit that we need to supplant the moderate, integrated gay movement with a revolutionary queer movement. A movement that is not simply radical, but revolutionary, capable of constructing an anti-capitalist analysis of our conditions, building solid and determined political spaces, and taking all necessary means to obtain our total liberation and that of all the oppressed. Only the emergence of a revolutionary queer movement can break the above-mentioned cycle and confront the current wave of fascism and eliminationism. This movement must be revolutionary and anti-capitalist because, in capitalist society, trans, non-binary and queer subjects are reproductive errors of the gender matrix. They are subjects who are difficult to integrate into

the family structure, which is essential to the organization of labour and consumption. They are aberrations of the social order and disruptors of one of the ideological and structural foundations of the dominant discourse. In other words, despite facades of tolerance and acceptance, despite the work of integration into the patriarchal organization of bodies, we are always, as a last resort, targets to be eliminated. This elimination takes the form of assimilation into an identity or social organization that is not our own, confinement to silence and the slow death of the closet, or outright extermination. There's no reason to believe that the liberalization of the bourgeois states will continue to spread and be sustained; on the contrary, their constant crisis character, accentuated by the ecological catastrophe, means that we can consider the possibility of real setbacks. Our rights will be among the first to fall when capitalism follows its fascist drift to maintain itself in the face of growing crises. We won't take the chance of trusting governments and capitalist classes, gay or otherwise, to defend our lives. We must organize ourselves and our allies to ensure our own survival.

This revolutionary movement must be built not only in reaction to the attacks experienced by the community, but also in an offensive stance against cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, ecocidal forces and all the other powers of oppression and exploitation, which together keep this world in an unlivable state. This movement must build its own force for mobilization, organization, politicization, education and defence. A force capable of taking to the streets, imposing political lines, building and defending social and political spaces, taking anti-fascist action, developing discourse and materially transforming the reality of the surrounding society. Eventually, this movement must invest itself in a truly revolutionary project to abolish the current system and develop a new world, based on the self-determination of individuals and communities in all aspects of human life, from economy to culture, from medicine to education, from love to science, from sex to ecology. Our bodies, our choices, our revolution. These projects, which may seem close or distant, can only be achieved through the alliance of queer and trans revolutionaries with the rest of the revolutionary or liberatory movements. These include anti-colonial, anti-racist, feminist, environmentalist and anti-capitalist movements of all kinds. In a system based on oppression and exploitation, we have everything to gain from a united front among the oppressed, and nothing to lose. Especially as the nature of our identities means that all these struggles run through and constitute our communities and their struggles. Our relative unity as a community, our history of struggle and politicization, our numbers and the present vitality of our communities, combined with the central place in current politics in which reactionary forces have placed us, give us the capacity (and the necessity) to constitute ourselves as one of the major forces in these common struggles.

Admitting the need for revolution is one thing, understanding how to create the right conditions for revolution, or at least for a strong revolutionary movement, is quite another. The diversity of conditions in our communities, here and elsewhere, means that revolutionary strategy is bound to be multiform. No one can with certainty draw up a universal plan for the abolition of cisheteropatriarchy or capitalism. On the other hand, by looking at how, throughout history, certain oppressed groups have seized upon their condition to constitute themselves as a political force, we can bring out certain tactics and strategies for our future struggles.

There is a rich history of revolutionary organization emerging from groups marginalized by their identities, building their own defence and adopting an offensive place in struggles. It would be impossible to make an exhaustive list, and that would be rather irrelevant. Here, I'll just mention four groups and some of their strategies that I find particularly interesting. These groups are

STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionary), the street trans group of Martha P. Johnson and Silvia Rivera, the BPP (Black Panther Party for self-defense), the Young Lords and, further back, the Bund, the Jewish socialist party of tsarist Russia. What these four groups have in common is that they were built within communities directly experiencing violence on top of capitalist exploitation: trans and gender non-conforming, African-American, Hispanic and Jewish communities, respectively. These four organizations have also all, at different levels, engaged in forms of community self-defense in the face of the repressive state or reactionary forces, generally indistinguishable from one another.

This is what is most remembered about the activities of the BPP, which caused a scandal at the time by arming the black community and encouraging them to point their weapons at the forces of the state. At the turn of the 20th century, by organizing itself within the Jewish communities of the Pale, the Bund innovated in this sense: faced with waves of pogroms - encouraged in particular by the Russian aristocracy and clergy - the organization prepared groups of trained and armed young men to defend their community in the event of attack. These armed responses were more or less effective, depending on time and place, but drastically changed the dynamic within the Pale². This defense strategy took different forms within the activities of the Black Panthers and Young Lords, who organized in a North American urban context. Their self-defense strategies focused on racist police violence, notably by organizing armed patrols to follow police officers into working-class neighborhoods. The Black Panthers also confronted state forces or racist gangs in shoot-outs and other violent altercations. We see in the actions of these three groups a capacity to organize violence in a defensive posture against those directly attacking their community. For their part, STARS members took part in the riots that drove the police out of New York's gay spaces, putting an end to police raids and gay bashing. Legend has it that Riviera threw the police the first or second molotov cocktail (or brick, depending on the version) at the start of the Stonewall riots. The use of weapons and the creation of militias would be an excessive escalation in the current context, at least in "Quebec", but to constitute ourselves as a true revolutionary force in the face of a wave of eliminationist and reactionary violence, it seems necessary to seize the defense of our communities. It's vital to develop an alternative to the state for our communities in the face of external threats.

It's largely our ability to confront these forms of violence and fight fascist or fascistic, queer-phobic and transphobic movements that will enable us to reach our siblings and develop the legitimacy of our revolutionary politics.

Another important aspect of STARS' and BPP's practices was to directly, immediately and autonomously address the urgent material needs of communities. For a number of years, STARS ran a house in New York City that enabled them to offer accommodation and living space to trans people who were homeless and/or sex workers. This was all the more important given the housing discrimination and extreme poverty experienced by the trans and gender non-conforming community. As for the Black Panthers, their famous breakfast program enabled them to alleviate the food insecurity of hundreds of poor black children in working-class American neighborhoods. Since the BPP was part of a logic of class struggle, it also offered lunches to poor white (or otherwise racialized) children in the neighborhoods where it was organized. This enabled them, at various times, to break down the racial divide created by historical segregation. We can also celebrate the BPP's extra-community alliance, notably the famous Rainbow Coalition of the Chicago

² The Bund was not the only left-wing Jewish force to organize such efforts, but it was by far the most significant.

BPP, bringing together the local chapter of the Young Lords and the Young Patriots, a white proletarian group from Appalachia.

From these examples, we can see that it is necessary for our groups to identify the immediate material needs of our communities and to develop, within the limits of our capacities, autonomous solutions. Helping our communities to facilitate their day-to-day survival in the capitalist system will, in the long term, determine our ability to establish ourselves firmly as a political force within them. We can't wait for revolution to weave solidarities, but we must build them in a way that aims to overcome capitalism, not maintain it. In other words, queer revolutionary groups need to build an autonomous capacity to meet certain needs of our communities without depending on the state or capital, in a way that can develop a post-capitalist imagination. On this question of autonomy and solidarity, the Young Lords have the interesting distinction of having developed a unique health care technique to help their community outside the dominant health care network. This technique, called Nada acupuncture, has been and continues to be used to treat the symptoms of addiction, PTSD and nervous disorders. In the current context of medical discrimination and declining access to gender-based healthcare, developing the ability to produce and/or distribute hormones independently of the healthcare system would be a major gain for our groups, movements and communities. More generally, the creation of a revolutionary (and extra-legal) capacity for care, based on scientific methodology and an experimental spirit, would represent an extraordinary means of helping our communities, and would demonstrate the importance of organized revolutionary groups.

Beyond these strategies of autonomous development, these groups, like most revolutionary groups, also ensured a presence in the streets through demonstrations, actions and multiple mobilizations. As I mentioned earlier, our movements need to be able to take to the streets and inscribe our issues there. This can be done in many ways, but it is necessary for queer revolutionary movements to take a leadership role in mobilizations. Without seeking to control the discourse or fight other types of initiatives, we can't afford to wait for institutionalized organizations and movements to draw up lines and finally get moving to take action. We have to take responsibility ourselves for creating moments of struggle, points of convergence and political public presence. By creating our own demonstrations, counter-demonstrations, actions, blockades and contingents, we bring an important dynamism to the struggles and demonstrate to our siblings their capacity to act.

Our movements must also autonomously create platforms for disseminating our discourse and strategy. These platforms, whether in paper, virtual or face-to-face format (festival, training, debate, etc.), must be filled with a wealth of thought and words that can inspire and guide our communities in the struggles ahead. Our ability to promote our ideals and confront them with the various immediate realities of our communities will determine our capacity to remain relevant and have an organic relationship with them.

In short, what I take from the history of these groups and their practices for our movement is the need to build a pluriform and organized movement; a movement capable of defending our communities, taking part in and instigating various struggles and mobilizations, and ensuring an autonomous capacity for solidarity and mutual aid.

Closing remarks

The need to build a revolutionary movement within our communities must, in many ways, be self-evident to many of my queer and trans siblings. The eternal struggle we face in this capitalist world makes us realize its imperfection, its cruelty. This realization presents us with a massive challenge: the work to be done seems endless, and our means ridiculous. And yet, all great social changes begin somewhere, through the action and work of determined groups of individuals. It's hard to imagine how to overthrow an entire system, but it's easy to get started! Find people around you who share your values and feelings. Form yourself into an organized group and start taking action on your own scale (postering against transphobia, creating and disseminating content, having a presence at demonstrations, finding other groups to collaborate with, organizing public events, etc.). By embodying yourself in public space, you enable others to resonate with your actions, to understand and join you. Develop your own power to act, develop your own strategies and ways of doing things, and study those of others. A handful of coordinated people ready to act can form the basis of a powerful collective that, in relationship with others, can create a strong movement.

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