

Queer politics

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Can the modern homosexual movement make room for gays who uphold traditional social norms?

Depends on who you ask. Members of Beaufort, a newly formed group of conser-

Against the Current

by **Neomi Rao**

vative gay students, believe that they can work for acceptance and certain legal rights within the traditional social structure. But at least two members of the Bisexual, Gay, and Lesbian Cooperative have a different opinion. When Beaufort petitioned for status as a political organization within the Co-op, two members blocked the petition, effectively saying that political diversity within the Co-op cannot be tolerated.

Thwarted in its quest for recognition as a political organization, Beaufort has agreed to remain a discussion group while the Co-op as a whole discusses changes to its

Political diversity within the Co-op?

constitution and debates the confused reality of the modern gay-rights movement.

Over the past few decades homosexuals have established themselves as a minority group fighting against discrimination. Just observe how the discourse against the "white male power structure" has now become a consciousness of the oppressive "white male heterosexual power structure." Trendy political movements have only recently added sexuality to the standard checklist of traits requiring tolerance.

Yet sexuality differs in important respects from gender and race. Sexism, racism, and homophobia all express a certain hatred and prejudice; homophobia, however, is often more deeply rooted. People tend to view race and gender as an accident of birth, one which should not confer special status, simply because it is given and unchangeable. But often these same people who tolerate women in the workplace and blacks and Hispanics as neighbors view homosexuality as a behavior—and behaviors, unlike gender and race, are subject to change.

When homosexuality is viewed as a correctable behavior, it can be judged as being immoral, unnatural, and contrary to religious doctrine. Yet no one knows whether sexuality is a biological phenomenon or a social construct. The truth may lie somewhere in the middle.

Because homosexuality, unlike gender and race, concerns a socially unacceptable activity, many gays have responded to the demands of normalcy in radical ways. They want not only equal rights, but they struggle more fundamentally to alter culture and

society. For most gay activists, the political has become an intimately linked expression of the social and the sexual, because they must politically assert the correctness of a particular behavior. Women and blacks had to struggle just to prove that they were as human as white males.

Homosexual activism in its most visible form engages mainstream society in a total cultural challenge. The "promotion of queer expression" comes in the form of explicitly sexual printed material, as well as national rallies and marches. In other, more grassroots forms, gays try to educate people about homosexuality by fighting to include books such as *Heather Has Two Mommies* in the required-reading lists of elementary school teachers.

It is this confrontational stance to traditional society which Beaufort seeks to avoid. Founders of the group believe that many of the tactics adopted by the Co-op work to alienate the straight mainstream. In challenging the conventions of the Co-op, members of Beaufort assert that there is no necessary connection between a particular social and political agenda and being homosexual. The interest gays share, they argue, has to do with legal rights.

The stance taken by Beaufort correctly makes sexuality one attribute of an individual, rather than an all-encompassing identity which dictates other areas of social and political life. As the Co-op has tried to "foster and encourage an environment in which lesbian, gay, and bisexual people may express themselves," they have simultaneously erected definitive identities and drawn new boundaries. Challengers of these boundaries are met with hostility.

In a small community, people feel an especially strong need for unity, since fragmentation means a further diminishing of "power." Therefore, minority groups often use homogeneous political goals to support social cohesion. Those who deviate are considered disruptive to the cause, traitors to the community. In searching for social unity, the Co-op has tried to exclude dissenting political voices.

The Co-op demands that mainstream society at least acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of homosexuality—it fights against what it considers to be an oppressive unity of sexuality. To avoid charges of

Sexuality is an attribute—not one's complete identity.

hypocrisy, it would do well to allow diverse political views in its own community.

Or maybe purity in politics is no longer just for the fascist white male heterosexual power structure.