

## NOTE

Although much of this essay is based on my recollections of experiences I have had over the past forty years, I want to acknowledge the many people who have in one way or another influenced and shaped my thinking about homophobia and provided me with support and inspiration to continue my work. They include Pat Griffin, Molly Gierasch, Jeff Beane, Peggy McIntosh, Angela Giudice, Zoe Perry, Althea Smith, Barbara Zo-loth, Hilda-Gutiérrez Baldoquin, Jamie Pierce, Robert Stein, my daughter, my son, John Stoltenberg, the lesbian and gay people in this essay referred to here (their names have been changed), and the women and men in the profeminist and gay-affirmative men's movement. There are undoubtedly others, and I regret not being able to list them all.

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## Homophobia and the Healing of Society

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As we learn that perhaps one-third of all Americans do not have health insurance, as we watch a peace dividend that could have reduced hunger and hopelessness go up in flames in the Persian Gulf, as we wonder why American children are so poorly educated compared to those in other modernized societies, we are not likely to think that homophobia plays a role in these problems. What could homophobia have to do with the threat of a nuclear holocaust? Or with the crumbling of America's infrastructure, such as highways and bridges? Or with the growing "purchase" of scientists and their research by defense contractors? Or with environmental destruction, unemployment, inflation, recession, workplace hazards, the feminization of poverty, the redesigning of jobs so that workers can be paid less, the soaring rate of violence, the use to excess of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs?<sup>1</sup> These are some of the basic structural problems that plague our country and diminish the richness of our lives when not actually killing us outright; what part could homophobia play in them?

The reason that we so rarely consider links between homophobia and large-scale socioeconomic and "quality of life" problems is that homophobia is often seen as a matter of individual prejudice, something that can be cured by education and thoughtful self-examination, while the other problems mentioned here seem to take place on a grand scale, outside our control as individuals, even behind our backs as citizens. What I want to suggest in this essay is that homophobia functions systematically to keep us from under-



not regularly asked by most individuals, and those who do ask them (such as antinuclear activists, worker's rights advocates, and proponents of socialized medicine) are presented to us (by the media, e.g.) as a small, strange faction, holdovers from the 1960s, out of touch with America today. Thus, while questions about these problems are being raised that could lead to solutions, they are not being taken up by large numbers of people. They are not leading to massive political action of any sort, and the problems do not seem to be getting solved. Certainly, there are some people who are "beating the system," but the bulk of those most affected by the loss of the peace dividend, environmental damage, increases in violence, and the various traps of poverty are not finding their situations improving. While these problems are arguably public issues, they are not being taken up in a large-scale, systematic way by the public.

What part does homophobia play in the silence about these problems? We can begin to answer this question by considering how homophobic people understand homosexuality. Some familiar sentiments speak of "a threat to the family," "moral decay," and "corrupting innocent children." This "threat to the American way of life" has been linked to Communist infiltration (as well as "leftism" in general), the liberal cosmopolitan aura of major cities,<sup>4</sup> and feminism—perspectives that are seen as challenging traditional religious and patriotic values, thereby weakening America.<sup>5</sup>

The language used here is quite revealing: *threat, decay, corruption, loss of innocence, weakening, infiltration*. It indicates a great fear, anger, and sense of loss somewhere in the collective American psyche, the presence of unease and discomfort and a certain kind of powerlessness. Because lesbian, gay, and bisexual rights activists have been so busy countering the stereotypes about homosexuality, including the ones focusing on moral decay and the threat to the family, we have not always taken the time to ponder whether these cries of anguish could be something *other than* homophobia. We are so used to seeing homophobia as a matter of irrational prejudice with its roots in religious intolerance and sex-phobia that we may be missing the ways in which completely different sets of fears<sup>6</sup> are being projected onto sexual minorities.<sup>7</sup>

standing the nature and depth of large-scale social problems as well as the ways in which we need to address these problems collectively if we are to bring about change.

Sociologist C. Wright Mills distinguishes between "personal troubles" and "public issues"<sup>2</sup> when considering how we understand problems with which we are faced.<sup>3</sup> He notes that, because of the individualistic temperament of our society, we tend to define the problems we encounter as personal troubles, results of personality quirks and individual biography, when in fact many of them are public issues. He gives the example of unemployment: if one person in a city is unemployed, she (as are we) is likely to consider the situation her fault (or at least her problem). In contrast, if 30 percent of the country's population is unemployed, we ought to consider this a public issue: a matter not just of personal biography but of large-scale socioeconomic trends that affect the country on many levels. A public issue is a problem whose effects are felt both by individuals and by institutions ranging from the government to the family, a problem for which some sort of collective or governmental action (rather than just individual action) will be needed to provide a solution.

The distinction between personal trouble and public issues does not seem to be so difficult to make, but it is important to realize that, unless a public issue is *defined as such*, it will remain a problem without solutions. To use Mills's example, individualistic solutions to a personal trouble ("Work harder!" or, "Get an education!") will not be very helpful if the public issue is that the economy as a whole cannot support full employment. Therefore, how we understand a problem will make all the difference in whether and how it gets solved. There are a number of questions that we will need answered in order to address public issues most effectively. Who gets to define a certain situation as a public issue rather than a personal problem? Who benefits from this situation? Who is hurt by it? Who or what is the cause of the problem? How did it come into existence? What factors contribute to its continuation? Who is responsible for proposing and implementing solutions?

These are all questions that can be asked about any of the large-scale problems with which I began the essay. However, they are



What if the notions of corruption, loss of innocence, and weakness that appear in homophobic thought and speech are displaced responses to *actual* corruption, loss of innocence, and weakness elsewhere?

If homophobia is actually a matter (in part) of displacement, we need to discover the target at which this sense of fear, anger, and loss would be more appropriately aimed. Correctly identifying this target will allow us to work much more effectively against both homophobia and whatever actual ills are at work that are too scary to encounter directly. I propose that the source of anguish is none other than those large-scale problems that I have defined as public issues. There is, indeed, a loss of innocence in America, but it has more to do with political and economic corruption in high places and low than with sexuality. There is, indeed, a threat to the family, but it appears in contaminated water supplies and toxic dumps, hangs overhead in pollution, and waits silently in the possibility of hunger and homelessness. Workplace policies that force both parents to hold two jobs in order to keep up with the bills or that exhaust and embitter workers pose more danger to families than lesbian or gay child rearing ever has. Our educational and medical systems, the radioactive isotopes used to make atomic weapons, and the very roads we drive on are decaying faster than anybody's morals. Moreover, the very lack of resistance to these threats suggests that despair is infiltrating our souls far more effectively than so-called perversion.

This argument may be able to make sense of how homophobia hurts, not just heterosexuals, but Americans in general. But there is an important piece still missing: the process by which the fear, anger, and grief gets transferred from these problems to sexual minorities in the first place. How is it that clear and present dangers that threaten our very survival are the subject of dejected and cynical talk rather than collective action while some forms of love and erotic connection are able to mobilize thousands of people overnight in protest?

The perception of homosexuality as a threat seems to be a matter of moral rather than socioeconomic or structural language; its

dangers are always couched in ethical, if not outright religious, terms. If in fact the public issues that I have identified are in some way behind the gut responses (fear of decay, sense of inefficacy, grief and anger about what has been lost) that are rerouted toward homosexuality, we may find that public discussion of these issues will take a moral tone. This way of framing the problems hides their structural aspects and also provides us with scapegoats. Thus, problems will be individualized and made to seem a matter of personal will rather than of social forces, and there will be particular people or sets of people who can be blamed for them. It is this sort of process that may be responsible for the "homosexualizing" of American decline.

Ironically, one of the best examples of this process does not concern sexuality at all; rather, it focuses on crime. If I am concerned about crime only because I am afraid of getting shot on the street at night, the obvious answer will appear to be more police and jails rather than delving into the complex roots of crime, especially when such an examination may involve an indictment of our current economic system. It is easier to attribute laziness, rebelliousness, lack of will to succeed, and outright evil to those individuals or groups whom we define as causing the problem than it is to examine the environment to which these people are responding, in which the deck is consistently stacked against them.<sup>8</sup> Sociologist Robert Merton contends that crime is one of a number of possible responses to a situation in which one is systematically blocked from attaining cultural goals (money, consumer goods, status) through socially acceptable means (advancing through a career).<sup>9</sup> If Merton is right, focusing on the evil of those who commit crimes will not help us change the society enough to eliminate this social root of crime.

It will, however, provide us with scapegoats (in this case, the poor and people of color) against whom we can vent our anger, sense of loss, and fear. We thus are able to discharge enough emotion to keep from asking certain questions (Why is the government cutting educational funds? Why do we expect the poor to take an "honest" job for five dollars an hour<sup>10</sup> that we ourselves would not



take rather than scoring big by selling drugs?) that might point us toward more institutional sources of violence and thus more structural and long-lasting solutions.

Such analyses of crime are not new, but the "blaming the victim" that they pinpoint is rarely compared to the scapegoating of sexual minorities.<sup>10</sup> Yet such a comparison may provide us with an interesting perspective about how manipulation works in our society. The poor and people of color are symbolically linked with crime, thus letting those in power (who tend to be rich and white) off the hook. In a similar way, sexual minorities are symbolically linked with danger, death, corruption, and decay, letting those in power (in this case, those who are in charge of institutions such as the government, the media, and the educational and medical systems) off the hook. This representational work has differently damaging effects on the poor and people of color, on the one hand, and sexual minorities, on the other (with, of course, a particular double whammy for those who fall under both designations), but the difference in effects should not blind us to the fact that the processes, and the functions they serve, are quite similar.

Central to the moralizing and scapegoating process are comparisons of current decay with the "good old days." Harking back to a golden age is neither new nor unique to our society; the Chinese philosopher Confucius, who lived in the sixth century B.C., offered his moral prescriptions as a way to return China to its golden age. Yet our society is particularly prone to focus its discomfort on time-honored institutions that seem to be changing; we link such changes with the decay that we experience.<sup>11</sup> Thus, "homos," "women's libbers," blacks and Latinos, and the poor come under assault for destroying communities, contributing to the decline of the family, and corrupting innocent youths.

I do not mean to suggest that sexual minorities have been favored throughout history until our time or that homophobia is in any way new. What I do mean to suggest is that scapegoating sexual minorities serves the function of helping us displace the sense of rage, helplessness, disgust, and grief that might otherwise force us to examine the structures within which we live for sources of our discontent. Perhaps such scapegoating has always served this func-

tion. But our era is one in which the stakes of social disintegration and corruption are particularly high *and* in which there are visible and organized sexual minority communities to attack. This combination could be part of a process in which the misdirections of our discomfort could prove lethal to large numbers of people. Certainly, it is proving lethal now to those with AIDS, regardless of how they contracted it. However, there may also be a multitude of deaths from toxic waste, drunk driving, nuclear accidents, hunger, exposure due to homelessness, lack of medical care, assault against women, and workplace hazards that would not occur if the energy that goes into homophobia went instead into organizing for consumer safety, environmental cleanup, a just economic system, alternative energy sources, socialized medicine, and the like.<sup>12</sup>

It is ironic that *homophobia* translated literally means "fear of sameness," given the extent to which homophobia is a fear of difference: wanting things to be the same as they were in the (reputedly heterosexual) past and wanting all people to be (heterosexually) the same. However, there is a greater irony here. Homophobia as I have described it deeply impedes an understanding of a much larger sameness that transcends sexuality: the sameness of being citizens in a nuclear age under a government that regularly lies to us; the sameness of trying to maintain human dignity while scrambling for good jobs in a society that provides too few of them; the sameness of breathing polluted air and drinking polluted water; the sameness of worrying about the future and wondering what, if anything, we can do about it.

The public issues described in this essay do not just happen like earthquakes, hurricanes, or floods. There are people responsible for them, people with enough resources and institutional authority to have their decisions count more than the decisions that most of us get to make.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, unjust structures cannot exist independently of the people who put them into practice. Certainly, such structures are controlled by people who are in some ways beyond our reach, but all of us cooperate in living with them. While it can be disheartening to think that each of us plays a role in the public issues considered here, there is an important corol-



ins [Boston: Alyson, 1991], 350-58; the essay has also been published in *Empathy* [2, no. 2 (1990-91): 23-28]).

7. Transgender people, as well as lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, are included here.
8. The social definition of whose crime gets to count as crime is crucial. White-collar crime and crime committed by the rich rarely make the papers. We are willing to define only the poor as dangerous, not the rich. Yet studies of class stratification, such as G. William Domhoff's *Who Rules America Now?* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1983) and Lillian Rubin's *Worlds of Pain* (New York: Basic, 1976), indicate that the kind of control that the very rich exercise can indeed be hazardous to our health.
9. Robert Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3 (October 1938): 672-82.
10. See William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage, 1972).
11. An important example here is the family, which comes to stand for security and a sense of community potency. The movement against reproductive rights has been successful to the extent that it has by using the fetus in a similar way, playing on insecurities about safety and well-being to blame "baby killers" for the ills of society. However, as Howard Zinn (*A People's History of the U.S.*, [New York: Harper & Row, 1980]) argues, there have been a lot of people for whom the good old days were not so good.

12. It has also not helped us that we have entrusted so many of our problems to "experts" to solve. Problems that are defined (by the government, the media, the educational system) as too distant, technical, or overwhelming for individuals to tackle have simply been handed over to people who have been granted authority to respond to them. Some particularly clear examples include global climate change, air pollution, economic recession, and foreign policy. However, most large-scale problems ultimately wind up in the hands of experts simply because they are understood to be out of our control. I am not suggesting that every individual ought to be a political scientist, economist, and environmental analyst rolled up into one, but it is interesting to note the seductiveness of coming to regard major social concerns as "not my problem."

13. People are generally said to be agents insofar as they can play an active role in shaping their environments and thus in shaping their lives. In comparison, sociologist Paul Schervish (personal communication) speaks of the "hyperagency" of the ultrarich.

lary to our part in the problem, and that is our potential part in the solution. These structures can be changed when enough people do whatever is necessary to refuse to participate in the "business as usual" that damages and destroys so many lives. Homophobia is part of this business as usual. It deflects our responses to injustice, and it scapegoats certain people in exchange for offering a false and dangerous peace of mind to the rest. It hurts everyone. Overcoming homophobia is part of building a just and humane society.

## NOTES

Let me make some of my biases clear. I am a white middle-class college-educated bisexual woman. I make use of a sociological perspective and advocate feminism and democratic socialism as ways to approach social problems. I mention these aspects of myself in hopes that this essay will spark responses from others located at different places in our society and will be part of a much larger collaborative effort to rethink these concerns. Let me also here take a moment to warmly thank Warren Blumentfeld for his support and Jaki Ortiz for her comments.

1. The phrase *the feminization of poverty* refers to the growing trend that the poorest Americans are women and their children.
2. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford, 1959), 8-9.
3. In most places where I use *we* in this paper, I mean individual Americans. I especially have in mind those Americans who are in a position to vote, protest, lobby, mobilize mass movements, and in other ways affect public policy. In the few cases where *we* designates a smaller group, I will try to make the special usage clear.
4. New York City has been called "Sodom-on-the-Hudson," while there are regular predictions that San Francisco will fall into the Pacific as punishment for its sins.
5. These perspectives do in fact identify certain public issues and propose solutions for them; this is, in large part, why they are so threatening.
6. There is a set of arguments linking homophobia to the fear of embodiment and especially the fear of death. While this essay does not focus on these arguments, they are interesting and compelling and may be most useful in conjunction with ideas such as those presented in this essay (see James Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978]; see also my "Present Tense: Biphobia as a Crisis of Meaning," in *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out*, ed. Lani Kaahumanu and Loraine Hutch-