

Dumbed Down and Played Out: ***The Gay Movement and the Liquidation of Boy-Love***

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Three days in the life of the editor of the North American Man-Boy Love Association *Bulletin*:

On Tuesday, I get a collect call at work from Richard (I've changed some identifying facts). He was well known in his local gay community and on the arts scene, and used to do volunteer work with gay youth. Once the charges hit the papers, many of his friends wouldn't call him. I wrote him back in February, in the first days of his sentence, but I had not heard from him. He's serving eleven-to-fifteen for sex with two teenage boys, and clings to the hope that in five years he might get parole, but sex offenders today almost never do.

On the first night in prison, he tells me, the guards stripped him naked and put him in a cold, padded cell with just a thin blanket. They announced his crime to the men on the tier, and for hours the prisoners pounded the walls, screaming that they would kill him. Richard says he pulled the blanket over his head and managed to fall asleep.

Wednesday morning, 12:30 A.M. I am wakened by a call from a man in Chicago. A friend of his in Michigan got thirty years for consensual sex with a thirteen-year-old boy. The man plea-bargained to spare the boy a trial, but the judge reneged on the sentencing agreement. The caller is trying to help his friend appeal. Do I know of any helpful legal precedents? Their relationship came to light, he tells me, after the youth got caught in sex play with another boy, and was taken to a therapist, who pressed him for details of his sexual experiences, and then reported them to the police.

Friday afternoon, I go to my post office box, and get the latest letter from my friend Abraham, a psychiatrist and rabbi. He has been on the inside for about three years, and at the earliest, he might get out around 2005. Probably because of writing I helped him publish, Abraham was moved recently to one of the worst prisons in New York. "Things have blown up pretty badly here," he writes. "There is one other observant Jew here, who is also in for a sex offense, although not involving children. To make a long story short, he and I were walking in the yard last Friday when someone 'bumped' into him and slit his neck open with a razor. Fortunately the carotid artery was not damaged, but it was close. He now has sixty-eight stitches, and is in 'involuntary protective custody.' A confidential informant told the officers that yours truly is next on the list to be cut." In the meantime, my friend Abraham writes, he is locked twenty-four hours a day in his five-by-nine foot cell.

Also in my box is a letter from Edward, who is serving ten years in a Kentucky prison. He spends his time studying and writing hauntingly sad short stories and earnest essays about what is wrong with how psychologists and social workers treat boy-lovers and their boys. His latest essay comes with a cover drawn by Kevin, thirteen years old, the boy for whom Edward is in prison. They still keep in touch. "I was thinking about you when I drew this picture for you," Kevin writes. "I just want to say before I go, I love you."

The Founding Moment

In December 1978, when thirty-four men and a handful of teenage boys caucused at Boston's Community Church to form the North American Man-Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), they had reason to feel optimistic. Among the group were veterans of the anti-war, civil rights, and gay liberation movements. If there was one thing they'd learned, it was that social change was possible through organizing and activism. As the voices of black people, gays, and the anti-war protesters had begun to be heard, couldn't the same be possible for men and boys who shared erotics and affection?

Hope was in the air that day, because the gay community in Boston had successfully fought off a witch-hunting district attorney, who was exploiting a man-boy sex case for his reelection bid. In Revere, a gritty northern suburb, there were men who were giving blow jobs to some local teenagers, with beer, pot, and pocket money thrown into the bargain. The scene had been going on for as long as anyone could remember.

After seeding the media with intimations that this was the scandal of the century, DA Garrett Byrne established an anonymous tip line to clean it up. Boston was the home of *Gay Community News*, then the movement's *de facto* national paper, and its activists were skilled and sharp. They saw the danger the unfolding panic and the hotline could pose to gay men. Over a kitchen table in Dorchester, a handful of activists organized a defense committee to combat the witch hunt. The Boston/Boise Committee (named after a famous Boise, Idaho, scandal in the 50s), didn't take a public position on sex between adults and youths, but it was clear where its sympathies lay. Over the course of a year of demos and press releases, and a gala fundraiser starring Gore Vidal, the committee succeeded in putting the DA on the defensive, quashing the hotline, and, come election day, helping defeat Byrne. The scandal of the century fizzled out in two dozen plea bargains, mostly probationary sentences and fines.

In the meanwhile, the publicity the committee attracted brought

to it a critical mass of men who identified with their feelings of affection and desire for boys. As one of its final acts, the Boston/Boise Committee (BBC) sponsored a one-day conference on “Man-Boy Love and the Age of Consent.” An Episcopal bishop from Connecticut, a well-known Boston University psychiatrist, and social workers from the state prison for sex offenders were among the 150 participants. At the end of the day, some conference-goers caucused, and NAMBLA was born. Its work done, the BBC gave its remaining bank balance to found Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), New England’s gay legal group.

There was a brief opening that NAMBLA enjoyed. A few gay social workers in Boston worked with NAMBLA members to help place homeless teenage boys. The social workers at the state prison kept in touch with NAMBLA to provide housing and support for boy-lovers finishing up their sentences. When Boston’s lesbians and gays contemplated setting up a community center in the late 70s, NAMBLA was in on the discussions.

But the optimism of NAMBLA’s founders proved off the mark. There was to be no cultural opening for pederasty. Indeed, in the new regime of sexual repression then taking shape, boy-love, and adult-youth sexuality generally, would become pivotal evils. GLAD, founded to help defendants and youths in cases like Revere, today won’t touch with a ten-foot pole gay men in legal trouble with boys. GLAD even sanitizes its official history to cover up the fact it shares a parent with NAMBLA.

What Happened?

In 1976 and 1977, as the Christian right was beginning to feel its oats again and America’s first “born-again” president took office, there was a small surge of media attention given to kiddie porn and teen prostitution. But soon after Reagan took office, the wave became tidal, saturating the media with stories and images about a profound sexual danger to children and adolescents.

The discussion about sex abuse that emerged from the feminist consciousness-raising movement in the 70s came from women who had incest experiences. The aim of their initiatives was getting men who had sex with their young daughters to stop what they were doing and acknowledge what they had done, but to keep police and prisons out of the picture. But with the Reagan revolution, the right wing seized on sexual dangers to the young as a political icon. The rhetoric became sharply punitive, and the attention now refocused on a threat to children coming from outside the family.

By the mid-80s, many TV watchers had been brainwashed into believing that there existed a vast “child porn” industry involving, on some accounts, billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of youngsters, that bands of pedophiles snatched tens of thousands of children off the streets annually, that bizarre conspiracies of men and women had infiltrated day-care centers and were involving toddlers in Satanic sex rites with horses, elephants, and decomposed corpses. Millions of milk cartons carried photos of missing children, more than 99 percent of them runaways or taken by the losing parent in a custody dispute. But milk cartons just gave the name and the “DOA,” or “date of abduction,” ghoulishly imitating hospital shorthand for “dead on arrival.”

These claims were mostly fabrications and distortions, as even the media began to realize. But they left a sediment of draconian new laws and networks of cops and social workers dedicated to rooting out “abuse” that “victims” and “offenders” didn’t realize was going on.

Laws requiring corroboration in court of illegal sex were abolished, and new ones were written allowing hearsay, making prosecutions of consensual but taboo sex easier. Therapists, teachers, and other professionals were legally mandated to report evidence of illegal sex involving minors. Statutes of limitations for prosecuting such relationships were abolished, and rules of evidence weakened.

Across the board, sentences for consensual sex offenses were increased, and life terms for sex play with teenagers or children are now commonplace. Under California's "one strike" provision, that punishment can be mandatory. Starting with Washington, many states have passed laws allowing for permanent civil incarceration of sex offenders, including those guilty of completely consensual relations with minors, after any criminal sentence has been served. With the number of persons jailed for sex with minors already swelling and set now to skyrocket, the *New Yorker* suggested in March 1994, that the state reinstitute castration, underscoring that this is a demonization of male sexuality.

The Supreme Court declared in 1982 that porn depicting minors was a wholesale exception to the First Amendment, and Congress has taken advantage of the loophole to expand continually the definition of child pornography. Under guidelines issued by Clinton's Justice Department in 1995, "child porn" can include an image of a person younger than eighteen, fully clothed, and engaged in no sexual activity whatsoever—in other words, any photo of a boy a NAMBLA member has in his house. Penalties for possession range up to ten years in prison.

The 1994 federal crime bill criminalizes sex with persons under sixteen (and under eighteen if a gift is given) outside of the U.S. or across a state line, even if the relationship is perfectly legal under local laws. The mere intention to travel to have legal sex with a minor, as revealed by a letter or conversation, is punishable by up to ten years in prison. The crime bill also requires that states establish public registries of sex offenders, so that persons found guilty of consensual sex with minors are marked for life, and can be thrown back in jail if they fail to update their address, or if the cops misplace their annual re-registration. In states where already in effect, public registration laws have led to death threats, beatings, and firebombed homes.

The Metamorphosis

The sexual coercion of children was a crime often underplayed before the 70s. But the attempted solutions to the problem that came out of the child sex panic are soaked with hate, retribution, and dishonesty, like a rag with gasoline.

Our culture's fixation on the sexual dangers to children and youth can be compared to the fixation on black rape in the post-Reconstruction South. Interracial relationships then, like inter-generational relationships today, were forbidden and scandalous. White Southerners' response—beatings, lynchings, castrations, rhetoric about sullied purity, a generalized climate of terror for black men and boys—had little to do with the genuine problem of rape and coercion in the South. Most Southern rape, after all, was probably intra-racial, and when inter-racial, its victims were predominantly black women at the hands of white men, not white women raped by blacks.

The purpose of the South's war on the black rapist—a war that loaded with suspicion all contact between black and white, much as every interaction between man and boy is loaded today—was to preserve the color line. It was a matter of keeping secure the crown jewels of white privilege, at a time when the social order founded on it was under threat.

What has been the latter-day “reconstruction” that has provoked and shaped the child and adolescent sex panic? An answer lies in the anxieties and dislocations caused by the liberalizing economic and social transformation that American society (and the West generally) undertook in the 60s and 70s. The racial equality, feminist, and gay movements are emblems and were engines of this change, revolutionizing sexual mores, race relations, and freedom of expression. But the fuel powering this transformation was the intensifying and globalizing economy, which integrated American society (and increasingly all of the West) into a single market wired by networks of commerce and media. This dulled regional

economic and cultural differences, and generally limited the role of small and medium-scale social structures—communities, neighborhoods, families—to define, constrain, and establish the meaning of individuals' lives.

This transformation was a triumph of liberalism, not the liberalism that Democrat and Republican alike today vow to bury, but the basic, historical liberalism of free markets and individual autonomy that is the West's political ether. These ideals were asserted originally back in the Enlightenment in defiance of feudalism, with its given, fixed roles, and limits on individual action. It wasn't philosophy, but the emerging market's dynamism that did feudalism in, by means of the opportunities the market opened to individuals outside the old constraints of manor, guild, and church. The social transformation of the 60s and 70s was similarly about a dissolution of historically-grounded social and economic structures, which the developing market deprived of economic function and dissolved.

Consider the pre-Stonewall male homosexual life in New York City that historian George Chauncey has chronicled from 1890 to 1940. Chauncey uncovers a rich tapestry of homoerotic scenes, varying with and incorporated into the city's patchwork of ethnicity, religion, trade, race, and class. There was no general gay consciousness, but in neighborhoods there existed many vibrant homoerotic subcultures. What made them possible, and blocked a general gay movement, were the solid ties within neighborhoods that had a clear economic and cultural function. As the market developed, these neighborhoods gave up most of their economic structure. Mom-and-pop stores gave way to chains, the local factory shut down, the children grew up and moved to New Jersey. These communities lost the boundaries that had defined them, lost the differentials of information flow, commerce, friendship, religion, and ethnicity—boundaries high enough to evolve distinctive cultural forms and hold people within them.

Take also the South's peculiar institution of race segregation. Across America, small agricultural towns flourished because of the need for a large population to work the land. In the South, the predominance of small-scale agriculture and slavery's legacy made segregation useful to local land-holding elites to keep poor whites divided from blacks. But as the U.S. market developed and grew more unitary after World War II, small-scale agriculture declined and with it the South's local elites. The Southern economy became more like other regions', weakening the pillars of Jim Crow and paving the way for the civil rights movement's eventual success.

These examples illustrate the distinctive, and potentially illiberal, cultural forms that can be spawned within an organic community—a group of people living in a given place who deal with each other over time within a stable context of production. The social arrangements that develop here are not governed by abstract rights. They grow, rather, out of the necessity for people in a community to accommodate each other. The processes of “getting along” are familiar. Office workers, for example, often post family pictures on the walls above their desks. They don't have the formal right to do it—the walls are not theirs—but custom dictates they can, and woe to the boss if she asserts otherwise.

People who have direct control over a space have a lot of say over how it's used. We tend to leave people alone who aren't bothering anyone. We overlook bendings of rules that don't threaten basic structures and where everyone involved seems content. If something has gone on before, there's a tendency to let it happen again. Such are the guidelines governing the precise allocation of powers and control over spaces in organic communities. The rules are pragmatic, context-bound, sensitive to precedent, and, to be sure, reflective of larger social forces and relations of power—class, race, sex, and sexuality.

Out of this informal process of communal negotiation, often not

even transacted via language, come arrangements that accommodate considerable deviation from stated norms—witness New York’s rich pre-Stonewall homoerotic scenes, which had no “right” to exist, enjoyed no legal protection, but survived and often flourished anyway. These arrangements, not decided by reference to abstract rights, can also violate liberal standards—witness segregation. Even in societies with a highly developed market, much of the social realm is left to these informal processes. But organic communities, in contrast to mass market societies, are characterized by the breadth of social space given over to them.

As the market developed—the post-World War II period seems decisive—organic community declined, and with it, the capacity to sustain informal, locally-based arrangements. The factors contributing to community’s undermining are many, but they reflect the elaboration and intensification of the market: suburbanization, the automobile, television, the demand for labor mobility, declining need for manual labor, the weakening of unions and other institutions of working-class solidarity, the expanding private sphere of middle-class consumption, the growing power of social workers, and the fracturing of the nuclear family, itself a shard of the old extended family. Where these changes did not directly enhance the autonomy of individuals vis-a-vis the community, they simply weakened the latter.

The decay of community is registered in our use of the word. In phrases like “gay community” or “IV drug-using community,” the term is a vaguely positive or euphemistic way of referring to a group of people with something in common. These are communities of special interest, defined usually by a pattern of consumption, rather than organic communities, with shared locale, a density of material connections, and human-scale rules of engagement. The developed market allows broad scope for these virtual communities, because commerce becomes ever more specialized and the capacity grows to narrowly target information. But these communities of

special interest can individuate less than organic communities. They don't have the space, continuity, or boundaries to develop very distinctive social forms. They exist essentially as a segment of the larger market. The models aside, the same liquor ads appear in a glossy gay magazine as one for Hispanic businesswomen. Indeed, it is only after the market has safely dulled the knife's edge of cultural difference that a rhetoric celebrating "diversity" can take hold.

The market created the opportunities of which the postwar social movements deftly made use. It did so by softening up communities, reducing their ability to channel individuals into particular roles and forms. The market also increased opportunities for individuals to connect with each other and gain access to resources—such as money and media—outside the old collective structures. The frustrations these social movements voiced, while not new, were felt all the more keenly just because of the diminished capacity of community to contain and repress them.

The social movements of the 60s, felt throughout the Western world, were not revolutionary, but based squarely on Enlightenment principles. These movements' contribution to liberal theory was a variation on nineteenth-century liberalism's concern with national self-determination: it was a focus, instead, on the ways liberal ideals are blocked for distinct kinds of people, as defined particularly by their race and sex. The changes these movements wrought were profound, but overdetermined by the sun of liberal ideology, which has kept the West in its gravitational orbit since the Enlightenment. From the American and French revolutions, it took many generations for the solar currents to heat the air enough to get the market's winds blowing. But once they blew, they dissipated the clouds of local custom and local elites that had blocked from so many places liberalism's light. It has taken even longer for the warming rays to begin clearing the fog of overt racism, sexism, and anti-gay feeling. But the same light—radiating from

TV sets, beamed by courts and social campaigners— now increasingly shines everywhere, exposing the hidden, homogenizing what it illuminates, and realizing conditions that approach total visibility.

Backlash in Code

The 60s social movements triumphed in short time, transforming the political and cultural landscape all around the West. Blatant racism, common in public less than a generation ago, is totally politically anathema. If not yet rare, it is no longer routine for police to beat confessions out of suspects. Contraceptives, abortion, and sexually explicit images and writing are widely available. For adults, the written word falls now essentially beyond state control. Homosexuality is effectively decriminalized and widely visible. None of these were settled questions a generation ago, but they are now.

Yet for all the apparent ease the speed of these changes might imply, they were profoundly disruptive. They challenged many people's sense of order and normality, even as they opened up opportunities. They struck deeply into the home, bedroom, and workplace, and established new codes of conduct and expression that many find alien. In jobs and relationships, men face new expectations of treating women as equals. A new racial code of conduct took hold, backed by state authority and elite opinion. The gay movement's prominence put men kissing men on prime-time TV and won avowed sodomites and sadomasochists invitations to the White House. Like it or not, everyone is forced to acknowledge a sexual identity. Technology and the market's segmentation increased the media's bandwidth, turning broadcasters and publishers into competitive commodity producers. Where previously the media tended to directly serve elites, now with life-or-death rivalry, they serve the mass market first. TV shows and rock bands compete to up the ante of the shocking, eating away at the sense of public decorum that social contention already helped rupture. The global warming of market competition has kept incomes stagnant in the

U.S. since the early 70s, sharply increased inequality of wealth, and pushed women *en masse* into the paid workforce. Demand for manual labor is drying up, excluding a swathe of the population from any economic function. These are the inflammatory catalysts at work on the body politic's seething underbelly.

Yet liberalism's ideological triumph makes it impossible to address these anxieties directly. It is remarkable, given the right wing's ascendance since 1980, how little is on the table. A rollback to 1950s-style censorship is not in the offing. Jesse Helms doesn't talk about throwing homosexuals in jail. The right wing homes in on the symbolic margins, such as public funding for gay-themed arts, but is stymied in pursuit of a broader agenda. Meanwhile, politicians of all stripes hail the free market as a social and economic cure-all. Thus the primary backlash to the 60s reforms takes a coded form: the just-under-the-skin racism of the Willie Horton ad, the war on crime and drugs, the attack against persons on welfare, anti-immigrant campaigning, and the child sex panic.

Like these other flavors of backlash, the child sex panic is a symptom of the underlying social inflammation. One of the hallmarks of the market's development is its expansion into areas of social life formerly outside of economic exchange. We all need goods that intrinsically can't be bought and sold—affection, love, friendship, family, neighborliness—but children need them most of all. Indeed, children are oblivious to exchange relationships: hire a nanny for a child and he'll fall in love with her anyway. Children feel especially keenly the market's erosion of family and neighborhood.

The market has crowded out these non-market goods with its own products. A portion of the six hours a day Americans spend watching TV used to be spent hanging with friends, family, and neighbors. Bringing incessant murder and mayhem from around the country into every living room, and dramatizing more of the same, is TV's tattle-tale strategy to forge intimacy with viewers. The

media's obsession with deviance, a boon to social movements that embody or claim to combat it, adds to the manufactured spectacle of social breakdown that is grist for the mills of law and order. Since children need an island of stability to gain their footing, all of this tends, reasonably enough, to focus fears on dangers to children. The anxieties women felt as they went to work and left their children in strangers' care outside the home were key, for example, in fueling the daycare center sex hysteria of the 80s and 90s.

But it is liberal ideology most of all that has scripted the child sex panic, and made it a theater for the expression and pseudo-resolution of our social contradictions. Liberal theory builds the edifice of individual freedom from the brick of the solitary, rational adult, able to maximize his or her self-interest. Aside from stipulating them by default as not rational, liberal theory doesn't know what to do about children. Enlightenment ideology is consistent with a wide and disturbing range of positions about the young. On the right wing is the idea that children are the property of their parents or the state until they reach an arbitrary age of reason. The left position regards children as essentially rational, and deserving virtually full autonomy. The conflict between these stances gets expressed throughout American society, but basic liberal ideology doesn't offer an answer.

Conservative perspectives, by contrast, don't suffer this gap. Whether one's fundamental obligation is serving tribe, the gods, or the fatherland, what is good for children is pretty much good for adults. Liberal theory's generational chasm gets exacerbated by the modern economy, which has no productive use for the young and creates few spheres where children or adolescents engage with adults outside the family. This turns children into ciphers, voids filled willy-nilly by adults' projected fears and dreams.

With the demise of community, which is intrinsically conservative, the rules governing social life have fallen explicitly in line with liberal standards. Those who argue for, say, legalizing drugs,

will out-boast each other about the draconian penalties they want exacted for those who sell pot to minors. This grandstanding substitutes for recognition of the moral problems, the dangers of misuse, that attend the freedoms they seek. Drugs, porn, or sado-masochism offer extreme experiences; their dangers flow from the same source as their great potential value. The left implies that whatever the moral risks of these activities, they are washed away by the fact that it is rational adults who are choosing them.

The left, therefore, has an ideological stake in polarizing the contrast between adults and children, because it is key to unlocking the freedoms they want. The right wing has a stake in the distinction, too, because it is the one limit to freedom built in to liberal ideology. For them, it offers a starting point from which to win broader controls, as the current debate over Internet censorship illustrates.

The child sex panic is a sort of HIV of liberalism, in that it infects the ideological immune system that normally insures freedom and keeps bigotry in check. This immune breakdown is worsened by the mass market's dissolution of community, whose interdependencies normally serve as a separate limit on hate.

At a White House press conference in January 1996, President Clinton announced a new initiative to display pictures of missing children (most of them nabbed by feuding parents) at post offices nationwide. The president then offered the podium to a child protection activist, who homed in on the evils of pedophilia. The only cure for pedophiles, the man declared to the national media with Clinton standing by approvingly, was "the Dahmer treatment;" that is to say, killing them. In an era fixated on rituals of sensitivity to minorities, the call for killing pedophiles, sanctioned by the office of the president, was remarkable. It was as remarkable as the fact that among our usually vigilant guardians of political correctness and civic decency, nobody noticed.

Whither the Gay Movement?

The mainstream lesbian and gay position is that homosexuality and “pedophilia,” as it is usually called, are totally different and unrelated: historically, psychologically, and morally. The claim aspires to be obvious, a matter of logic and definitions. And can we please now change the subject? But like apartheid’s insistence on the essential difference between black and white, what is cast as a simple truth requires a burdensome repressive machinery to keep afloat, a rewriting of history, a habitual wariness and dishonesty. By first isolating and then trying to cast off pedophilia, the lesbian and gay movement is marked increasingly by its relationship to it.

Pedophilia and homosexuality are inextricably bound, which is exactly why many feel impelled to segregate them. The term “pedophile” entered the pop lexicon suddenly in the 1980s, on the coattails of the concept/ “sexual orientation.” It was not because people suddenly started coming out as pedophiles that the idea came into currency; of the hundreds of boy-lovers I’ve known, only a handful embrace the term. Rather, it was right-wing social campaigners who put pedophilia on the map. The right took to the tabloids with this obscure term from psychiatry’s diagnostic manuals as a counter-example to the gay movement’s positive assertion of sexual orientation. Whereas *child molester*, like *sodomite*, implies a person who commits a certain act, *pedophile* denotes an unchanging, unchosen, unfixable condition of which the sex act is only a sign. And that is exactly what the gay movement said that homosexuality was.

Gay activists had advanced their cause by arguing homosexuality to be a sexual orientation, and sexual orientation to be a morally neutral category—everybody has one!—deserving legal protection. That claim rested on the similarity of sexual orientation to race, both being, on this view, a fixed, unchosen quality of an individual.

Ah, but the right wing countered, waving the Medusa’s head of pedophilia, “Here is a sexual orientation that is pure evil.” It was

as if, just at the time white America finally began confronting its racism, anthropologists on expedition in the Himalayas had found a hitherto isolated and distinctly inferior race of human—let's dub them the Yirks—who were incontrovertibly, inveterately, and congenitally stupid, lazy, and amoral. America in 1958 would have received news of the Yirks with great interest, and proponents of racial segregation, then besieged, would have enjoyed a fresh boost. Black people would forge on, to be sure, contending that they, at least, were a race the moral equal of whites. But undercut would be the strong claim that racial discrimination was always fundamentally wrong.

The emergence of the pedophile into the menagerie of sexual minorities transformed politics on the Animal Farm. In one respect, *pedophile* was a more successful category than *homosexual*, of which it was a back-formation. While homosexuality remains an ambivalent concept in the wider culture, provoking disgust even among people whose politics prescribe tolerance, pedophilia currently enjoys a status of glittering, untarnished repugnance. As such it has become a sort of gold standard of sexual value—negative value, to be sure—in relation to which other sexual groupings, with more uncertain position, can denominate the coin of their virtue.

The consequences sometimes are amusing. For a magazine article on bestiality, I've been talking recently to people who have sex with animals. A number of zoophiles gave me sophisticated arguments about how consent does not require rationality or language, how animals can readily convey whether or not they enjoy fondling or fellatio, and how a person with basic empathy can have sex cross-species without crossing any troubling moral boundaries. These are arguments directly relevant to the debate about children's capacity to consent to sex play. But then these bestialists, who have regaled me with tales of their encounters with cows or cats, go on to say how they draw a strict line in the barnyard against erotic play with calves and kittens, which they regard as totally unethical.

For homosexuals, asserting virtue by abhorring pedophilia gets complicated by the intertwining of man-boy and androphile homo-eroticism. Most gay men, like most straight ones, feel desire, overt or covert, for persons younger than eighteen. This intermixing is a problem, but an opportunity as well: it provides a stage for a theater of purging and sanitizing, by which homosexuals can prove their fitness for liberal society. Thus the expulsion of NAMBLA in 1994 from the International Lesbian and Gay Association, after ten years of membership. In porn magazines there are the fine-print declarations that references in stories to *boy*, *youth*, *youngster*, etc. absolutely do not signify a person under the age of eighteen. A number of gay and lesbian academics recently discovered that pederasty in ancient Greece, ever since a model for expression of male homosexuality, has in fact nothing whatever to do with it. Ancient pederasty, they say, was simply a naked will to power, an assertion of the Greek citizen's right to penetrate the bodies of his inferiors. Aside from adding that Greek love was high in cholesterol, it would be hard to paint a more unflattering portrait, even if it means ignoring all those Greek love poems to boys that express a familiar desire and affection, and which gay readers today still enjoy.

The most common strategies for segregating boy-love and homosexuality do not call attention to themselves, but are familiar to gay people because they are the same ones used over the centuries to cover up and deny all same-sex desire. *Out* magazine sponsors a CD of music by "gay" composers, such as Tchaikovsky, Schubert, and Britten, but ignores the centrality of boy-love to their eroticism and creativity. Authors of triumphalist gay histories revel in the personages whom they can place in the homosexual pantheon. They don't add that Michaelangelo or Walt Whitman would face years in prison and demonizing as "pedophiles" in today's America. Physique magazines from the 50s and 60s casually mixed images of men and boys. Through the 70s, the *Advocate*

classifieds were a shopper's paradise for boy pornography. But the adolescent is totally absent today in American gay erotica. Even the word "boy" is verboten in *Advocate* advertising, though that doesn't stop FBI agents from using the magazine's classifieds for running kiddie porn stings. Pulp sex novels with lusty schoolboys, commonplace in the 60s and 70s, also have disappeared—all in an effort to pretend that the politically troublesome desires that spawned them have also vanished.

The Ideological Collapse

For a test case to investigate the effects of this dishonesty on the queer body politic, we could do worse than consider OutWrite, the annual gay and lesbian writers conference. The event draws around 1900 people, and is sort of an annual parliament for those who articulate and transmit gay and lesbian culture and history to ourselves and the wider world.

OutWrite is a project of the parent of *Gay Community News*, which in the 70s and 80s helped shape the U.S. lesbian and gay movement, first as a newspaper and crucible of political thought and contention, and then by sending out from its ranks many of the first generation of national gay and lesbian leaders. *GCN* anticipated the pattern of gay and lesbian solidarity that today is the most visible face of homosexual politics and culture. It worked to situate the gay movement within a broadly progressive agenda that pays attention to issues of race, sex, class, as well as sexual orientation. That contribution, too, is today part of the broader movement's basic furniture.

As befits that history, it is the aim of OutWrite's organizers, and the expectation of participants, for there to be careful attention to political symbolism. A good deal of the work of the conference's organizing committee is balancing panels by race, ethnicity, and sex. Sensitivity to nuance is such that the major issue at the conference a few years ago—the occasion for outraged

speeches, an emergency “town meeting,” and mortified apologies—was the racial composition of a subcommittee that had chosen the finalist for an award for a book by a lesbian or gay writer of color, along with the process by which the name of the award had been selected. It is just this attention to detail that makes OutWrite a useful case for examining the implications for gay ideology and politics of the child sex panic.

OutWrite wears its willingness to discuss man-boy love as a badge of its commitment to openness and diversity. For two years, at a time of growing gay hostility to NAMBLA, I was on the OutWrite organizing committee, which testifies to this commitment. The committee was clear in wanting to insure that the discussion of boy-love be civil and polite and, indeed, declared as much one year in the conference program book.

In trying to push the question of man-boy love on the organizing committee, I took advantage of this opening. As I saw friends disappear off to jail and censorship’s maw grow ever wider, I felt word had to get out. I went to sleep at night thinking that for our writing and publishing, I and my fellow activists risked years in prison. The gay movement’s progressive wing needed to recognize that we faced repression spiraling out of control, threatening all.

As if to illustrate my point, while I was on the committee, Canada passed a sweeping child pornography bill, targeting words as well as images. The 1993 legislation criminalizes texts that “advocate” sex with persons younger than fourteen. The NAMBLA *Bulletin* was the law’s explicit target, but prosecutors declared they intended to go after fiction as well. The penalty for writing illegal texts ranges up to ten years in prison; for possessing them, five. Across Canada, gay people were scrutinizing their bookshelves, and burning novels, like Kevin Esser’s *Streetboy Dreams* and Hakim Bey’s *Crowstone*.

I regard my intervention in OutWrite as a failure, and the gay left’s stated willingness to discuss this issue as a dishonest front.

The willingness to discuss man-boy love might seem like OutWrite's openness to dealing with other controversial issues that provided focuses for the conference: AIDS, class, ethnicity, gender, race. But in each of those cases, discussion took place against a backdrop of moral concern: for diversity, fighting racism, comprehending the monumental loss from the epidemic. These commitments did not force discussion into a mold; indeed, presenting a range of opinions and experiences was the means of expressing and deepening them. But there was no question of debating these fundamental commitments. There were to be no panels at OutWrite asking "AIDS: Clearing out the rot of sexual compulsives?" or "Black lesbian writers: Why so hung up on race?"

In the case of man-boy love, OutWrite's pledge to open discussion was a substitute for any moral commitment. OutWrite welcomed writers and representatives from publications who had argued for the purging of boy-lovers from the community, for the appropriateness of long prison terms for people who break age-of-consent laws, and even for boy-lovers being killed. Presumably, these opinions were to be expressed at the conference politely, so as not to obstruct the free flow of ideas. But the purpose of "open discussion" in this context was not to express an underlying moral commitment, so much as to show its absence. The issue had the status of a troubling aesthetic dispute, on which opinions were strong and contention sharp, which needed to be handled with care, but on which nothing significant rested.

On the organizing committee, I tried to shift the terms of debate. We needed to state clearly, I felt, that the rhetoric of violence and hate against boy-lovers was morally wrong, as were long prison sentences for noncoerced sex, and the widespread censorship of man-boy love in lesbian and gay bookstores and media. Only once these positions were established could open discussion be useful. But my fellow committee members regarded this as special pleading.

What happened at OutWrite reflects generally the way man-boy love gets discussed among lesbian and gay progressives. There is a willingness to debate “Can children consent to sex?” a question that, within the framework it is posed, can’t be resolved. The failure to reach closure is taken not as sign of the limits of liberal theory and our need to ask the question in new ways, but of the problem’s permanent intractability. This eliminates the need to do anything, or to monitor the relation between our beliefs and what is happening in the world. There has been almost no change in the nature of the discussion of this issue in the gay community since the late 70s, when the problem in its current form first was posed. This is despite the fact that today life sentences are routine for consensual sex, many of the legal safeguards that once existed for defendants now are gone, sex offenders must list their names on public registries for life, and writing an essay in support of man-boy love can get you ten years in a Canadian prison. If after *Kristallnacht* a German journal of letters devoted an issue to “the Jewish problem,” and took pains to be fair and express the best case for all sides in the debate, we would have no trouble seeing its moral inadequacy. But that is how man-boy love is treated in the gay movement today.

For me, the perniciousness of the situation came home while hearing the welcoming speech at the 1995 OutWrite conference, given by veteran activist Urvashi Vaid, former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. On one level, she was a logical choice—she had just won a \$200,000 advance for a book on gay politics. Her speech, loudly cheered, dealt eloquently about the need for lesbians and gays to embrace a broad vision of justice. But under the policies that Vaid has supported, many of the most important homosexual writers of the past century would today face years in prison in the U.S. Vaid has campaigned for the elimination of boy-lovers from the gay movement. She may say that she is trying to protect girls from abuse and unwanted sexual attention,

but that doesn't explain why the laws she has supported or been silent about would condemn writers like André Gide, Walt Whitman, and William Burroughs. Along with Congressman Barney Frank, Vaid has said that she thinks that "homosexual pedophiles," her phrase, deserve "civil rights." But Frank voted to extend federal child pornography laws to cover images of fully clothed minors, around the same time Vaid was urging the International Lesbian and Gay Association to boot NAMBLA.

The Gay Movement and the Market

The fundamental problem is not cowardice and opportunism among gay and lesbian leaders. The problem's roots, rather, go to the expression of homosexuality that has prevailed in the West. That is a homosexuality essentially a product of Enlightenment ideology and the market economy that it spawns. In its developed state, that economy dissolves all other social and cultural forms—including all other forms of homoeroticism. The gay movement should be understood as a product of the market both in terms of its structure, and the dynamics by which it has played itself out.

The first basic element of modern homosexuality is its equation of sex acts and identity. This is the position that persons who have same-sex sex are, in a deep sense, a distinct kind of person. Ideologists for homosexuality adopted this claim, and it succeeded in the marketplace, because it mimicked the answer to a central crisis of twentieth century liberal capitalism: the race question. As the developing market dissolved the local structures that had perpetuated racism and sexism, liberal ideology faced the discrepancy between its fundamental legitimizing ideals of equality and its racist and sexist reality. The solution involved elevating to an ideological tenet the realization that liberal ideals were failing because of persistent inequality for specific classes of people. In order for homosexuals to benefit from the forms of recognition and redress that thus became available, they needed to have a status as distinct and deeply

rooted as race and sex were understood to be. They didn't have to create such a status, but merely assume and de-pathologize one that psychiatry had already fleshed out. This provided the ideological structure of contemporary homosexuality.

The second basic element of modern homosexuality is its material existence as a community of special interest existing in the broader market. The market provided the matrix for the growth of gay identity. When we talk about "gay community," we refer mostly to institutions located within the chain of commerce: bars, bathhouses, porno cinemas, publications, and bookstores. The chance for homosexuality to develop a commercial locus reflected the growing capacity of the market to sustain narrowly tailored segments that served, not just particular neighborhoods, but entire cities or regions. The gay community's informal organizational network emerged from these same capacities. They expanded the ability of individuals to link up with others of common interest, and to publicize homosexuality so as not to stamp out its locales, but aid its spread.

By taking up residence in the market and the political sphere, homosexuals committed themselves to an explicit public presence. This required developing and pursuing an ideology, something people in pre-Stonewall scenes did not have to do. Once you open a bakery on the public square, you can't then refuse to put a brand name on your bread, or fail to respond when the newspapers allege rat hairs in your rye. Elaborating and promoting a gay ideology was necessary for, and served the interest of, gay businesses owners and aspiring activists, whose careers depended on the success of homosexual identity.

Pursuing a gay politics has consequences. For one, it forces a dialogue with those who represent prevailing norms. The challenger in such a dialogue, for there to be any point in it, has to maintain that, despite surface disagreement, there is a commonality underneath that all can work toward. That baseline, for homosexuals confronting

a bigoted society, was underlying liberal ideology. But dialogue engenders a subtle shifting of the challenger's position so that it comes closer, where it can, to prevailing norms. The point of political dialogue, after all, is to gain something. That shift is not risked when discussion is avoided in the first place.

Another effect of this turn by homosexuals toward discourse and ideology was the gay movement's claim to jurisdiction over all same-sex eroticism. The assertion that act equals identity not only grounded gay political legitimacy, but offered an olive branch to hostile heterosexuals. The claim of gay identity made homosexuality easier to take, because the depth and boundaries of that identity insulated non-gay people from becoming personally implicated in homosexual acts, even if gay sex were to cease to be taboo. If acts equal identity, and I don't have the identity, then I don't desire the acts.

But this ideological strategy burdened gay identity to account for *all* homosexual acts, at the risk of losing legitimacy. From this comes the movement's hostility to those who have homoerotic relations without joining the gay fold. Thus, it is said, married men who suck dick at highway rest stops haven't dealt with the truth of their lives, football players embracing on the field aren't kidding anyone, and every queer has the civic duty to come out of the closet, or, perhaps, face an outing.

By immersing itself both in the market and in ideology, homosexual politics has served essentially the interests of the middle class, which dominates the gay movement. Gay identity strongly correlates with middle-class status, in the U.S. and internationally. It was middle-class persons who benefited commercially and politically by the movement's expansion. From the middle class have come most of those making careers as activists or administrators. But most important, middle-class homosexuals needed a public ideology of homosexuality to have sex. The respective sexual cultures of the working class and rich are based less on guilt and more on shame, a fear of being found out. The

ideological structure of the gay movement, its demand for a fixed identity and aboveboard commercial venues, its need to convince doctors and parents of homosexual normality, reflect peculiarly middle-class preoccupations with status.

The gay movement's structural and ideological path succeeded because it was selected by the market in a society increasingly market-dominated. But these choices, like all market choices, are not thereby the best outcomes or neutral ones. This is evident at OutWrite, which, like any trade show, aims to grease the market. In this instance, it is the market that wrings fat advances, literary fame, and crossover success from selling homosexual identity via books. Those goods involve exploitation of a natural and collective resource: the past and present of homoeroticism. This exploitation, as epitomized by Urvashi Vaid's speech, is actually a savaging of homoeroticism. It involves undermining its actual history, normalizing a campaign of liquidation against its most vulnerable practitioners, and putting a palatable and progressive gloss on the whole affair to anaesthetize discussion.

These are normal market processes. They are comparable to the conditions that make the destruction of Brazilian rainforests by cattle ranchers economically rational for those engaged in it. The preconditions for disaster are set in place by the market itself. They include the erosion of community and loss of its ability to impose traditional agricultural techniques, which tend to be sustainable just by having survived the test of time. These preconditions include the fact that market societies value materialism above all other goods, and the fact that the market, once in place, gives individuals who serve it extraordinary rewards. With wealth and success come the means to buy legitimacy. Who remembers East Timor?

The market intensifies the present by destroying the communal continuity that culturally inscribes the past and future in the now. At the same time, it rewards decontexted individuals for serving its immediate demand, and elevates the value of its prizes above

all others. The emptying out of history, the reduction of all time and space to a totalizing present, can be seen in the stubble of the rainforests, as well as the complicity our gay and lesbian leaders with a campaign to extinguish eroticism between men and boys.

The Market's Limits

At a dinner party recently, a forty-five-year-old gay man told me about the sex he had growing up in Florida with all the teammates on his high school football squad. Sex like that happens much less these days, because the gay movement has draped the albatross of identity around the neck of same-sex erotic play.

The homoerotic play of boys is part adolescent hijinks, part male bonding, part erotic rehearsal, and at once affection, aggression, and their containment. These games are a constant across cultures and eras, and they have nothing to do with identity. Their continuity with similar play among young male animals is obvious. This is the natural field of man-boy erotic interaction. It is not always genital or involving sexual penetration, and for myself and most men I know who like boys, it does not need to. But if the mock-fighting, grappling, and roughhousing on the bed does not lead occasionally to clothes coming off and naked romping, it's usually from conscious direction or years of drilling in body hate.

Sexuality's forms are historically constructed. But on the scale of accident and necessity, whose furthest point of determination is *that I eat*, and whose contingent extreme is *what I ate today*, man-boy eroticism falls toward the essential. Even in a culture now less gendered, this homoeroticism can be eliminated only at society's peril. Until recently, man-boy scenes flourished silently, often within or contiguous with forms of pre-Stonewall homoeroticism. The decline of man-boy solidarity and affection, corresponding with the child and adolescent sex panic, is registered, I think, in the sharply increased rate of boys' suicide (which nearly doubled for males ten to fourteen from 1980 to 1992).

The incompatibility between boy-love and market-based homosexuality is not simply the imposition of identity. It is also the politicization of sexuality. The gay movement is based on a gamble that playing the market would pay, and indeed for some it has. But making sex so ideologically contentious and buying symbolic rights with the inflated coin of liberal values has led to some big-time winners, a mass of losers who've lost their shirts, and resentment all around.

But more than anything else, boy-love is hurt by what is more a precondition than an effect of the gay movement: the dissolution of community. To ask in the abstract about consent in sex between men and boys is an endless merry-go-round of indeterminacy, one the gay movement likes to ride if it has to address the question at all. Liberal theory, which gives us the powerful concept of consent, doesn't know how to apply it to the young. It's a permanent muddle. Boy-love needs to be considered in the context of community, which provides structures of visibility, on-going connections, mutual obligations and dependencies, a context in which reputations can register and transgressions exact consequences. This is where man-boy relationships most naturally and beneficially occur. While market-based homosexuality requires the demise of organic community, boy-love flounders without it.

What Next?

A question that markets raise, but cannot answer, is "What happens to losers?" Markets reward winners and punish defeat. If otherwise unchecked, the market's natural tendency is to create a few very rich people, and masses of poor. In the cultural marketplace of the capitalist West, modern homosexuality has prevailed, and man-boy love has lost. In August 1995, when a federal judge struck down a law in Washington allowing for permanent civil incarceration of persons who have consensual sex with minors, the right wing screamed about liberal courts that coddle criminals. The

question soon will fall to the Supreme Court. In America's current ideological and political climate, there seems no limit to the blood that can be exacted for those who have sex with minors, not mandatory life sentences, perhaps not the death penalty. The left and the gay movement, a repository of relevant history and experience, have so far put up no resistance. Gays have simply exploited the hysteria as an opportunity to purge the boy-lovers, present and past, from their ranks.

Another question the market raises, but cannot answer, is whether it can sustain itself. The market, like people, depends on goods that cannot be bought or sold, such as the ecology and culture. The market economy, whose wealth and pitch of individual autonomy underlies modern homosexuality, is not sustainable on a global scale, or perhaps even for the rich West. But the cultural effects of capitalism are felt far beyond those who enjoy middle-class pleasures. What are the prospects for preserving erotic forms existing outside the market? What will the market sever first? Its ecological root? Or will it break its root to culture by its erosion of accumulated knowledge and custom? Can there be a smooth transition to a new, sustainable structure? And when we have to reconfigure, will the traditions we need to unearth be lost?

These are vital questions for the lesbian and gay movement, because it has cast its lot on a wager: that the liberal market represents the end of history. That the market perfectly expresses our nature and protects our rights, a realm of pure positivity. That the full penetration of a regime of total visibility is freedom, not slavery. That we can throw ourselves into the market's sun as if it were a light that will not consume us.

Now that we know our true identities, we know we are not sex offenders. With our sexual ideology at last rational and grounded, we can make every crime capital, punish real sex offenders forever into the future for transgressions that occurred any distance in the past. Our system of sexual control exists outside of politics or

morality, in a realm of pure administration. Sitting at its end and on the top, history reveals no form of eroticism that we cannot finally comprehend.

Every age, to be sure, asserts its hubris and casts wide the web of its preoccupations. But we are unmoored by our loss of what has been throughout history the primary realm of human freedom: the informal unspoken spaces within organic community. Destroyed by the market, they leave us with language, ideology, and identity. With the market's total spatial inflation, the present moment's absolute intensification, no age has been so unconscious of history's weight, so marooned by the structures of recollection. As we stand, our hubris is our doom. That is why the lesbian and gay movement is morally and intellectually bankrupt, and that is why we must reclaim our history to imagine ourselves anew.