

## REVIEWS

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***Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance.*** Edited by KITTY KRUPAT and PATRIC MCCREERY. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001. 320 pp. Paper, \$19.95; hardcover, \$49.95.

Benjamin Shepard

Five years ago, a group of New York University American studies graduate students with one foot in street-based activism and one foot in the academy co-edited *Policing Public Sex* (1996), a volume that helped set the terms for a five-year debate about public sexual culture and globalization in New York City. The same result may be the case for *Out at Work: Building a Gay-Labor Alliance*, a volume of essays and interviews edited by Kitty Krupat and Patric McCreery, two more American studies graduate students at NYU. Except this time, the subject builds where *Policing Public Sex* left off—answering the unresolved question of how best to defend non-normative, queer sexual culture in the era of globalization.

Their thesis is simple: “We start from the belief that sexual rights can be pursued most effectively through a radical coalition between labor and

GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender] movements.” *Out at Work* is a testament to the utility of innovative thinking. As academics in training, both editors were involved in the successful campaign to unionize graduate student assistants that was ruled on by the National Labor Relations Board last fall. It was a ground-breaking victory that only a couple of years earlier many would have thought impossible. *Out at Work*, like *Policing Public Sex*, builds on the real-world experience and the world-making possibility of queer life and community organizing in the social and political laboratory of New York City. Before you create it, you have to imagine it. The result, while not without the inevitable flaws of innovative work, is a bold synthesis of proposals, case histories of campaigns, and unresolved agendas, and is a thoughtful road map

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toward the work's goal of "advancing the workplace rights of lesbians, gay men, and other sexual minorities."

From Harry Hay to Harvey Milk, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) and labor movements have had deep, often underappreciated roots. Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay's experience as a union organizer informed his vision of gay community organizing and politics (Bronski 1998, 65). And long before Harvey Milk, the nation's first openly gay elected official, made much of any headway with the San Francisco gay community, he was building inroads with San Francisco Longshoremen's Union during the 1970s Coors boycott. Milk's guarantee that every gay bar in the burgeoning gay ghetto would boycott its product hit Coors where it hurt—the pocketbook—and sowed the seeds for a future alliance. The progressive coalition in San Francisco began with Milk's novel idea of bringing trade unionists and homosexuals together. By 1978, dividends from the coalition paid off in labor's help to defeat a California ballot initiative to prohibit gay people from teaching in the San Francisco schools (Shepard 1997, 40).

Krupat and McCreery build on the essential insight of the early queer-labor alliances—that identity and class, while not one and the same, are closely interrelated. As Harvey Milk taught us, coming out is an essential statement of class consciousness. While seldom acknowledged,

issues of identity and class walk hand-in-hand throughout the history of the movement for GLBT rights. This is the core contribution of *Out at Work*. Instead of being reductionist and privileging one point at the expense of the other, the essays within the book *simply* contend with the complexity of the theme.

In "Out of Labor's Dark Ages: Sexual Politics Comes to the Workplace," Kitty Krupat builds on historian Robin Kelly's eloquent rhetorical contention, "class is lived through race and gender." Yet Krupat concludes, "Class is lived through race, gender, and sexual identity." The beauty of *Out at Work* is that, once the theme is solidly put in place, it is used to assess a broad range of dilemmas facing the contemporary GLBT movement. It is the missing conversation within analysis of the divide between social-justice-minded queers and the gay assimilationists around the past and future AIDS high-risk groups, sex worker rights, etc. Krupat's contention that "Social identity can be, and often is, the axis of class struggle" becomes the volume's central theme.

Krupat's essay is followed by John Sweeney's "The Growing Alliance Between Gay and Union Activists." Sweeney, the president and architect of the AFL-CIO's revitalization, credits labor's new-found success with its embrace of women, people of color, and young workers. But the new house of labor needs queers. In order to continue its new-found suc-

cess, the labor movement must build on Pride at Work, the AFL-CIO gay labor group, to draw gay and lesbian union members into programs for leadership and development, and to provide them opportunities to become leaders in their workplaces and in their unions. Sweeney acknowledges that while homophobia certainly still persists, when the trade unionists are forced to reconcile union idealism with homophobia, more often than not faith in equality floats to the top.

*Out at Work* is at its strongest where the link between class and sexual identity flows throughout its essays. Beyond one-shot legislative campaigns, both movements, to succeed, will need to envision broad creative visions for organizing and “welcoming workers in every public and private aspect of their lives.” That includes sex in all its messy arrangements. Creating a politics that deals with both class and sexuality is half the battle. The remaining challenge involves nurturing a movement that honors equality despite difference. It is easy to say you favor diversity until you see someone really different. Throw “deviance” into the pot with the class and gender analysis, and inequality expands; old biases often prevail. This idea is what Patric McCreery begins with in “Beyond Gay: ‘Deviant Sex’ and the Politics of the ENDA Workplace,” a tight essay using notions of queer as cultural difference to critique a policy proposal: the Employment Non-Discrimination ACT (ENDA). ENDA is a gay job-protection bill that came

tantalizingly close to passage, failing by a one-vote margin of 51–49 in the U.S. Senate back in 1996. To consider the role of heteronormativity and the workplace protection laws in gay and lesbian lives, McCreery uses the case history of a gay schoolteacher fired for moonlighting as a porno film actor. The case study addresses a core dilemma within a GLBT movement split between economically privileged gay assimilationists, who want to be “just like everyone else,” and social-justice-minded queers developing a critique of social, sexual, and economic regimes of the normal. Equal rights laws, such as ENDA, are fine as long as sexual mores remain conventional. Throw in gender play, sex work, S&M, or public sex, and workplace struggles become a great deal more complicated. Regardless of whether you are president of the United States or a transgender person in a law firm, things are going to be difficult. In McCreery’s view, as long as workplace antidiscrimination laws such as ENDA neglect issues of sexual variance, they remain futile. Until the left creates a vocabulary of sexual difference, McCreery astutely concludes, “it remains to be seen whether any coalitional efforts would truly seek to transform heteronormative culture or, like ENDA, would only assimilate more people into it.”

Referring to the successful campaign to unionize the San Francisco peep show, the *Lusty Lady*, another case study featured in *Out at Work*, McCreery places workplace struggles for sex workers firmly on an agenda

for queer/union coalitional work. The Lusty Lady campaign demonstrates that in certain circles, progressive elements within organized labor recognize that workers in the sex industry are just that, workers. But there is still a great deal of work to do. As an activist who organized sex workers against the New York City XXX Zoning Law, which eliminated the jobs of thousands of working men and women, I cannot help but wish McCreery had come to one of the SexPanic! meetings back in 1997 and 1998. While Prostitutes of New York (PONY) and the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom helped out early on, there was little support for the sex workers destined to lose their jobs and hit the streets once the zoning law was enacted. Unfortunately, unlike in San Francisco, there is no Exotic Dancers Alliance in New York for sex workers to turn to. During the entire five-year battle against the New York XXX Zoning Law, there was never any mention of unionizing the sex workers. Such an organization could both defend their economic interests and help prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. And most of the “progressive” left turned up their noses at this group of “workers.” Sadly, few within the organized left are willing to see sex workers as workers with a right to a job.

### **Replacing One Narrative of Decline with Another**

In her essay “Out of Labor’s Dark Age: Sexual Politics Comes to the

Workplace,” Kitty Krupat argues against the narrative of labor’s decline following the Taft-Hartley Act and during the ensuing Reagan-Bush years. She points out that many elements of labor’s new ascension were first constructed during those years of decline. Yet, while Krupat argues against one media-driven narrative of labor activism’s decline, she contributes to another mythology. Early in the introduction, the editors proclaim, “With the demise of Queer Nation and ACT UP, the LGTB movement has been left without a recognizably radical wing.” Like stories of labor’s decline, premature autopsies for radical queer activism do little but perpetuate misunderstandings between movements, while serving the needs of a mass culture ready to be done with the embarrassment of a continuing AIDS crisis. In fact, today queer/AIDS activists are taking the lessons of their early years and applying them to the inequalities of access to AIDS drugs across the world. Years after its supposed demise, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) forced President Clinton to stop sanctioning poor countries that manufacture generic versions of expensive life-saving drugs, or import medicine at the best world price (Bull 1999). AIDS/queer activists played key roles in protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Bank, both of which had become clear obstacles to getting drugs into bodies of people with AIDS all over the world. And ACT UP Philadelphia served as the cen-

tral organizers for the protests against the prison industrial complex during the Republican convention last year. The question is, why do observers insist on reducing the constant flux of social movements to a state of decline?

When he accepted the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982, Gabriel Garcia Marquez spoke of a similar dilemma of interpretation. Europeans, he proclaimed, "insist on measuring us [Latin American authors] with the same yardstick with which they measure themselves, without recalling that the ravages of life are not the same for all, and that the search for one's own identity is as arduous and bloody for us as it was them. To interpret our reality through schemas which are alien to us only has the effect of making us even more unknown, even less free, even more solitary" (Martin 1989, xii-xiii). The suggestion that "the LGTB movement has been left without a recognizably radical wing" contributes to the same sort of misunderstanding. The statement obfuscates a queer activist movement in transition. If one looks to queer activism with the assumption that every ad hoc group must have a mission statement written by Allan Bérubé or Larry Kramer, one will never see the current project. The assumption neglects the continuing work of queer direct action groups ranging from Fed Up Queers, who were the first to be arrested during the Amadou Diallo protests in 1999, to the Church Ladies for Choice, who are still involved in clinic defense work against hostile

anti-choice protesters, and ACT UP's affinity group YELL (Youth Education Life Line), still using guerrilla theater to battle and disrupt the New York Board of Education meetings, where abstinence is still the only acceptable means of prevention of pregnancy. The list could go on and on.

Queer Nation is gone, yet, as with many queer direct action groups, its members continue to be involved with activist projects. The editors refer to SexPanic! and the Matthew Shepard political funerals as examples of queer direct action without detecting or acknowledging a broad-based queer activist movement in New York. Those who organized the Matthew Shepard funeral were also involved with SexPanic! and ACT UP. When one group fades, activists take a rest and a new one emerges. The names change, but the movement continues for those who stay engaged enough to notice.

On more than one occasion, *Out at Work* reflects a lack of serious thinking about AIDS and queer activism. For example, Desma Holcomb's "It All Begins with Coming Out" addresses the issue of "unionizing AIDS and gay/lesbian community agencies." The ethical question is, should any AIDS service organization ever unionize? This issue speaks to a core question about the professionalization of a grassroots reform movement. For an AIDS service organization to unionize is to assume that its workers should dedicate time and energy to saving their jobs instead of working toward ending the epidemic. For many, particu-

larly those frustrated with the unionization campaign of the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, unionizing AIDS services only creates a business out of an epidemic (Shepard 1997, 236).

Like many new books about the left, *Out at Work* begins by ushering in the spirit of the November 1999 protests against the WTO in Seattle, during which labor worked in coalition with environmental, anti-sweatshop, and countless other activist groups. Unfortunately, the analysis of what is required to sustain such a coalition is sometimes lacking in *Out at Work*. In particular, Jeff Truesdell's essay, "Gay Days at Disneyland," fails to reach the stated goal of placing issues of identity on the same par as class. Truesdell's essay uncritically considers the long history of "gay days" at the Disney Company. Instead of addressing the problems and criticisms of the Walt Disney Company, the author brushes them aside noting that with the exception of Disney's aborted plan to build an amusement park on a Civil War battlefield, "the complaints were scattered, and Disney could easily ignore them." Since 1994, countless groups—from preservationists to sociologists and anti-sweatshop, anti-monoculture, queer, and sex worker communities have protested Disney's role in the blandification of the cultural landscape, its use of entertainment as ideology, and its overall attack on New York's diverse communities in favor of family values that privilege white, capitalistic, heterosexual bodies. None of these issues are taken seriously in

Truesdell's essay. In a work about class-based organizing, you cannot wait until page seventeen of a twenty-one-page essay to mention that Disney uses sweatshop labor, just because the company allows gays to converge for "gay days." Even then, people of the same sex are not permitted to dance together, so what is the point of the essay?

*Out at Work* features Cathy Cohen's cogent essay "What Is This Movement Doing for My Politics?" first presented during the 1998 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Creating Change Conference. In the essay, Cohen specifically addresses the dilemma faced by gay employees who are given domestic partnership benefits at companies such as Disney: "As we fight for domestic partnership we must also fight for a living wage for all workers, independent of sexual orientation, because it is part of our progressive vision of a just society." In other words, the GLBT movement cannot give Disney a thumbs up just because the company gives gays domestic partnership benefits. Suzanne Pharr, who moderated a workshop titled "Not Just My Piece of the Pie: Doing Queer Work in the Context of Race, Class and Gender" at the same Creating Change Conference where Cohen was speaking, posited, "Do you want to create a better world or do you want to create a better world for queers?" (Johnson 1998). A class- and sex-based movement requires the former. A politics of assimilation requires the latter.

## In the End

In the end, the best essays in *Out at Work* were written by its editors. They make the book worth the investment. Sexual identity, class, heteronormativity, and the labor movement—Krupat and McCreery have compiled a wonderful, heady group of themes not usually referred to in the same breath. *Out at Work* is part of an emerging project in activism that focuses on praxis instead of theory. It suggests we may be putting enough distance between paradigms of cold wars past to witness a new politics unencumbered by yesterday's ghosts. It is easy to forget that during the McCarthy era more people lost their jobs for being alleged homosexuals than for being Communists (D'Emilio 1983). Why should these two groups with such overlapping histories not forge new movements where sexual identity and class are no longer considered mutually exclusive entities?

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***Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II.*** By JOSHUA B. FREEMAN. New York: New Press, 2000. 409 pp. Hardcover, \$35.00.

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New York City, the "capital of capital," has also been an epicenter of labor organizing. This was particularly true in the early postwar years,

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