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# A Neglected Document on Socialism and Sex

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THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENT, “Socialism and Sex,” was long forgotten until this rediscovery.<sup>1</sup> In it, H. L. Small—most likely a pseudonym—provides an elegant, if concise, exposition on behalf of destigmatizing consensual sexuality between same-sex lovers. Issued in 1952, “Socialism and Sex” was written at a moment when few in the United States imagined, let alone expressed, so bold a philosophy of sexual liberation or so explicit a political program in favor of decriminalizing sexual acts between consenting adults of the same sex. Therefore, it provides fresh evidence supplementing recent understandings that a “homophile” or homosexual rights consciousness was tentatively emerging within that severely repressive context. The important developments of the 1950s cataloged by scholars include the Mattachine Society (formed in 1951), *ONE* magazine (first issued in 1953), the Daughters of Bilitis (launched in 1955), and literary manifestations such as Allen Ginsberg’s poem “Howl” (1956) and

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<sup>1</sup>“Socialism and Sex” was published in *Young Socialist* 5 (Winter 1952): 21. A copy of it exists in *Independent Socialist Mimeographia*, 28 vols. (Berkeley, Calif.: Independent Socialist Press, 1971), 22:227. This collection, a set of bound volumes containing photocopies of discussion bulletins and other mimeographed ephemera of the socialist movement of the 1940s and 1950s, was issued by the independent scholar Hal Draper and is owned by only four libraries: the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley (where this writer discovered the document while carrying out research for another project); the University of California, Davis; Southern Illinois University; and the University of Michigan. Ernest Haberkern, director of the Center for Socialist History, which owns the rights to the *Independent Socialist Mimeographia* and the rest of Draper’s estate, courteously granted rights to this republication. There may be other archives that hold the original *Young Socialist* bulletin.

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Ann Bannon's best-selling novel *Odd Girl Out* (1957).<sup>2</sup> "Socialism and Sex" is an example of like-minded views finding expression in yet another subterranean niche: among socialist youth.

Although many American lives in the 1950s did not fit the domestic stereotypes fostered by such radio and television series as *Father Knows Best*, conservative postwar gender ideology and anti-communist hysteria had severely constrictive consequences for anyone attracted to others of the same sex.<sup>3</sup> During and before the Second World War a flourishing gay subculture existed, but, starting in the 1930s and escalating in the late 1940s and 1950s, morals crusades, conformist pressure, and restrictive governmental interventions, including the antigay aspects of cold war repression, combined to impose fear, shame, and invisibility on gay life.<sup>4</sup> Quincy Troupe, a writer and friend of James Baldwin, recalls that in the 1950s "You weren't just

<sup>2</sup>Vern L. Bullough, ed., *Before Stonewall: Activists for Gay and Lesbian Rights in Historical Context* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002); Eric Marcus, *Making History: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights, 1945–1990* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); Jim Kepner, *Rough News, Daring Views: 1950s' Pioneer Gay Press Journalism* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Haworth Press, 1997); John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998); Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and Yvonne Keller, "'Was It Right to Love Her Brother's Wife So Passionately?': Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950–1965," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 385–410. See also the excellent documentary film *Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community*, VHS, directed by John Scagliotti and Greta Schiller (1984; First Run Features, 2004).

<sup>3</sup>John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940–1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Jeffrey Escoffier, "The Political Economy of the Closet: Notes Toward an Economic History of Gay and Lesbian Life Before Stonewall," in *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Gay and Lesbian Life*, ed. Amy Gluckman and Betsy Reed (New York: Routledge, 1997), 123–34; and Joanne Meyerowitz, ed., *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup>On the thriving earlier subculture see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); and Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Plume, 1990). On the cold war and the construction of the closet see David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Randolph W. Baxter, "'Eradicating This Menace': Homophobia and Anti-Communism in Congress, 1947–1954," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1999; Andrea Friedman, "The Smearing of Joe McCarthy: The Lavender Scare, Gossip, and Cold War Politics," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2005): 1105–29; and John D'Emilio, "The Homosexual Menace: The Politics of Sexuality in Cold War America," in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics, and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 57–73.

in the closet, you were in the basement. Under the basement.”<sup>5</sup> Martin Duberman observes that in the 1950s “the vast majority of gay people were locked away in painful isolation and fear, doing everything possible *not* to declare themselves.”<sup>6</sup> Given this context of loneliness and terror, “Socialism and Sex” is of great significance—a statement rare and daring for its time.

At the same time, “Socialism and Sex” confirms that conceptualizations of homoeroticism as a social issue in need of political solutions existed well before the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City and other pivotal events elsewhere signaled the arrival of a vastly larger, bolder, and more visible gay civil rights movement.<sup>7</sup> The most famous of these forerunners is the Mattachine Society, formed by Harry Hay and a handful of other veterans and sympathizers of the Communist Party.<sup>8</sup> “Socialism and Sex,” written one year after Mattachine was founded, appeared within a very different radical milieu: the democratic socialist movement. Because of the great variance between the respective political traditions that produced these efforts on behalf of the rights of homosexuals, “Socialism and Sex” represents a parallel and simultaneous impulse to political action that contrasts in salient ways with the Mattachine approach.

“Socialism and Sex” appeared as a single typewritten page in *Young Socialist*, the mimeographed discussion bulletin of the Young Socialists, the youth group of the Socialist Party headed by Norman Thomas throughout the mid-twentieth century. Socialists objected not only to capitalism but to the authoritarianism and dogmatism manifested in the American Communist Party and its model state, the Soviet Union. The mood and spirit of the youth organization in the postwar years was well to the left of the adult party. Until shortly before this statement was published the Young Socialists had been known as the Young People’s Socialist League and its members as YPSLs (with the acronym affectionately pronounced “Yipsels”). Discussion bulletins were semiregular publications, contributed to by the national group membership and distributed internally, not to the public. Bulletins permitted members of the organization to debate

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement* (Boston: Alyson, 1990), xiv.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Duberman, *Cures: A Gay Man’s Odyssey* (New York: Plume, 1991), 3.

<sup>7</sup>The two best treatments of the Stonewall events evoke very well both the subterranean quality of much of gay life before 1969 *and* the nascent civil rights consciousness that was developing well before the eruption, particularly by the early 1960s, when the black freedom movement provided an inspiration and model. See David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2004); and Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

<sup>8</sup>The book that first restored Hay’s pivotal role from obscurity is Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), 105–9, 406–20, which was soon followed by John D’Emilio, “Dreams Deferred: The Birth and Betrayal of America’s First Gay Liberation Movement” (1978–79), reprinted in *Making Trouble*: 17–56. A detailed, informative biography is Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay*.

strategies and tactics, assess contemporary developments, and ruminate on general principles, thereby clarifying thought toward the formulation of formal group policy.

This explains the essay's rhetorical strategy, which seems implausible now and was perhaps all the more incredible at the time, namely, to claim that a libertarian rejection of strictures against same-sex encounters would help win new adherents to the socialist cause. Given the blanket of ignorance and stigma that overlay the issue in the 1950s, public advocacy of eliminating legal sanctions against homosexuality would have been far more likely to unnerve or alienate potential recruits (even homosexual ones) than win them over. On the other hand, this claim carried within it the astute insight that those suffering oppression in a specific manner often come to political awareness or socialist consciousness through that identity—in other words, that so-called single issues often lead to broader social perceptions and connections, prompting more sustained and ambitious political commitments.

The document is written in an allusive language that is nonetheless assertive and crystalline in the clarity of its meaning. This quality speaks to the lack of a common vocabulary at the time to describe variance in sexual orientation. Nevertheless, "Socialism and Sex" drew effectively upon several traditions to make its case. Its expression of civil libertarian sensibilities in a Jeffersonian idiom was redolent of contemporaneous left-liberal resistance to McCarthyism's attack on subversive "un-Americans," but here the individual right to the pursuit of happiness was applied atypically to the fulfillment of sexual desire without fear of arrest or blackmail. Reference to the sexual openness of Scandinavian countries drew upon a more general transatlantic social-democratic admiration commonplace among YPSLs. The warning that suppression of "libidinal expression" or its "practice under fear" will thwart "a whole, productive individual" suggests as possible influences the Kinsey report, whose findings about the prevalence of male homosexuality had been published in 1948, and perhaps also Wilhelm Reich, whose ideas about sexual health were first translated into English in 1945.<sup>9</sup> Conscious placement of the word "deviant" in quotation marks called into question not only the castigation of a particular sexual preference as abnormal simply because it is a minority one but also the host of psychological and popular prejudices then prevalent against "inverts" as depraved, irresponsible, pathological, or unnatural. "Socialism and Sex" postulated that unhealthy guilt

<sup>9</sup>Reich's most salient work, *The Sexual Revolution*, was translated into English in 1945; interest in him was great in postwar bohemian circles because he seemed to justify "derepression" while combining political with sexual revolution, so he is a possible inspiration despite his own antipathy toward homosexuality. The Kinsey report, whose findings included much higher levels of same-sex sexual experience than previously known, evoked a positive response among homosexuals. See Wilhelm Reich, *The Sexual Revolution* (New York: Orgone Institute Press, 1945); and Alfred Kinsey et al., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W. B. Saunders, 1948). Another possible influence, though not as well known, was Donald Webster Cory, *The Homosexual in America* (New York: Greenberg, 1951).

and shame were the result not of sex or sexual orientation but of puritanical and discriminatory injunctions against same-sex relations. The way for those attracted to others of the same sex to become “whole” and “productive” was not to suppress their desires but for society to cease branding them in pejorative terms. In this way, “Socialism and Sex” pointed the way toward notions of psychology and health that would not become normative until the 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

This entire approach contrasts with Harry Hay’s political and intellectual framework as reflected in the Mattachine Society. Hay first enrolled in Communist Party classes in 1933 in emulation of his lover, the actor Will Geer (who after the lifting of the Hollywood blacklist would play Grandpa in the 1970s television series *The Waltons*). Standard accounts of Hay’s attraction to the communist movement emphasize his fleeting involvement in the 1934 San Francisco general strike. Ironically, at that very moment the Soviet Union, which Communists upheld as the highest hope for humanity, was proceeding to outlaw homosexuality by prescribing five years of hard labor for men guilty of voluntary sexual relations with other men.<sup>11</sup> In 1937, at the height of the Popular Front’s alliance between liberals and the left against fascism and war, Hay joined the Communist Party despite its prohibition of homosexuality among its members. By the 1940s he was a teacher for the Party, both internally and in public. The immersion in ideology and theory that this role required of him explains why he drew upon Joseph Stalin’s writings on nationalities and self-determination as well as anthropological understandings of culture (stemming from his interest in indigenous peoples and world folk music) to arrive at a historical-materialist theory of “homophiles” as akin to “Negro, Mexican, and Jewish peoples.”<sup>12</sup> Hay’s perception of gays as an oppressed minority culture resulted in the creation of the Mattachine Society, the first enduring American gay organization for self-understanding and social transformation. The Mattachine was not entirely original, because at least one precursor existed; Henry Gerber had begun the very short-lived Society for Human Rights in Chicago in 1924, an attempt that Hay knew of from an early lover. However, that earlier effort was almost entirely lost

<sup>10</sup>On Freudian discourse, the psychological idiom prevalent in the 1950s, see Nathan G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Tim Dean and Christopher Lane, eds., *Homosexuality & Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup>The new law, Article 121 of the Soviet Penal Code, was announced on 17 December 1933 and put into effect on 7 March 1934; mass arrests ensued. See David Thorstad and John Lauritsen, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864–1935)* (New York: Times Change, 1974); and Simon Karlinsky, “Russia’s Gay Literature and Culture: The Impact of the October Revolution,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman, Martha Vicinius, and George Chauncey (New York: New American Library, 1989), 347–64.

<sup>12</sup>“Mattachine Society Mission and Purposes” (1951), in Harry Hay, *Radically Gay*, ed. Will Roscoe (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 131; Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question*, trans. unknown (1913; New York: International, 1942).

to memory in the general culture by the 1950s, and the Mattachine Society was an unquestionable breakthrough: the first sustained gay rights advocacy group in American history.

Since the Mattachine Society at first existed in a veil of secrecy, it was probably unknown to the writer of "Socialism and Sex." This newly found document therefore represents a synchronous impulse. It ratifies the findings of scholars on the Mattachine Society who have identified the political left as an important wellspring for modern gay civil rights consciousness but speaks at the same time to a need for more in-depth scholarship on other left-wing contributors to that consciousness.

"Socialism and Sex" does not reflect or anticipate the instinct of self-organization that would shape the Mattachine Society and so much subsequent gay political activism. Its author does not refer directly to homosexuals or attempt to coin a term, like Hay's "androgynous" and "homophile," that would avoid the stigmas attached to the word "homosexual" and yet describe those attracted primarily to others of the same sex. That "Socialism and Sex" did not contribute to the creation of an independent organization goes a good way toward explaining why it was lost to memory. It is not that "Socialism and Sex" was guilty of what would later be termed an "assimilationist" or "accommodationist" reticence, for its animating spirit is emancipation. The contrast is rather between the structure and cultures of two very different sectors of the left.

Hay was compelled to leave the Communist Party, advocating his own expulsion, in order to pursue his quest for homophile rights. The leadership valued Hay's contributions but accepted his judgment that his severance was necessary. The Communist Party forbade membership to homosexuals because it believed homosexuality a perversion symptomatic of bourgeois decadence and a by-product of capitalism and fascism. It also viewed homosexuality, like drug use, as a security risk that made individuals susceptible to blackmail, which would undermine the organization or lead to exposure that would discredit it. Needless to say, this policy did not prevent gays from becoming party members or party members from coming to the realization that they were gay. It did, however, perpetuate inner identity conflicts and encourage subterfuge by subjecting gay party members to the very same pressures inflicted upon them by conventional society. Hay, for example, felt compelled to marry Anita Platky in 1938 in order to demonstrate his reformed nature when he sought to join the Communist Party in that same year. Although he had many same-sex affairs and encounters throughout his marriage, abandonment of the mask came only when he left the party and formed the Mattachine Society.

The logic behind the Communist Party's policy was blinkered. Homosexuality becomes a security risk only when there is a policy that denies gays and lesbians rights, thereby requiring them to remain closeted. Openness annuls blackmail by removing its opportunity. The California Communist leader who informed Harry Hay he was being dropped from membership



later observed: “It was a stupid policy nonetheless. After all, we had a number of Communists in Los Angeles who became informers because they worked for the post office and their jobs were at risk, but no one ever proposed that all government employees be dropped from our membership.”<sup>13</sup>

Although he left the Communist Party, Hay brought many residues of his Stalinism with him.<sup>14</sup> The Mattachine Society’s secretiveness and structure trace in part to the circumstances of McCarthyism and antigay repression, which demanded at least some modicum of discretion. However, the party’s authoritarian configuration also contributed to Hay’s conception of the Mattachine as a hierarchical organization led by an inner circle and maintaining the conspiratorial ethos of the underground. By 1953 a majority of newer members, hundreds of whom had joined after Mattachine had successfully defended a member from police entrapment, came to feel manipulated and sought an “open, democratic organization.” Hay opposed them, holding that such a transformation would sacrifice “all the idealism that we held while we were a private organization.”<sup>15</sup> This membership rebellion, reflective of widespread distrust of the initial conspiratorial and top-down structure of Mattachine, coincided with a threatened inquiry by congressional investigative committees, prompting Hay and other radical founding members to withdraw from Mattachine in 1953. As its new and more conservative leaders sought respectability, the Mattachine Society subsequently lost many members and pursued a timid, even self-effacing course. Although other groups and individuals would make fits and starts, including within the Mattachine Society itself, a completely open and democratic yet militant and uncompromising gay politics would not rise completely to the fore until the era of Stonewall.

A rather different organizational style and set of political traditions existed among the YPSLs. The Young Socialists made no official prohibition against same-sex desire and had no official ideology against it. No one was ever expelled from the Socialist Party or its youth group for “deviancy” or “bohemianism.” As one of the leading youth members in New York City,

<sup>13</sup>Dorothy Healey and Maurice Isserman, *Dorothy Healey Remembers: A Life in the American Communist Party* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 130. Allan Bérubé’s current research on the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union promises to shed new light on a context in which an open gay subculture did exist within a Communist-led labor union. Other studies of gay lives in and around the Communist Party include Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Knopf, 1988); Eric A. Gordon, *Mark the Music: The Life and Work of Marc Blitzstein* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1989); Janet Lee, *Comrades and Partners: The Shared Lives of Grace Hutchins and Anna Rochester* (Lanham, Md.: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000); and Bettina Aptheker, *Intimate Politics: How I Grew Up Red, Fought for Free Speech, and Became a Feminist Rebel* (Emeryville, Calif.: Seal Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup>Despite his late-life involvement in the Radical Faeries, a countercultural project, Hay continued to deny that the Communist Party had been homophobic, and he held considerable illusions about Communist states. For example, Hay once made his biographer leave his residence when he asked a question about the Communist Party’s homophobia, and he criticized defecting Cuban gays as “running-dog homosexuals” rather than speak out against Fidel Castro’s repressive policies toward gays (Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay*, xiv, 186).

<sup>15</sup>Katz, *Gay American History*, 417.



Bogdan Denitch, puts it, “We did discuss things sexual and were open to gay members.”<sup>16</sup> “Socialism and Sex” lacked any suggestion of a caucus or separate organization or even of a notion of distinctive cultural identities built upon variance in sexual orientation. That was consistent with the standard social democratic manner of thinking about oppressed groups, which had both strengths and weaknesses. To challenge racism, for example, socialists of this persuasion tended to protest discrimination and encourage inclusiveness, not a policy of separate action by African Americans. This tradition, when applied to the question of “the sexual individualist,” was double-edged. On the one hand, it inhibited and discouraged the type of independent gay organization that Mattachine pioneered and that would prove decisive for later gay and lesbian political development. On the other hand, the socialist valuation of tolerance, democracy, and inclusion meant H. L. Small could write freely, without fear of suppression within the left such as the expulsions that gay Communists experienced. Given the censorious climate in the wider society toward both homosexuality and socialism, there were abundant reasons to fear sanction from *outside* the organization, of course. This explains why the author most likely adopted a pseudonym. The use of a party name, even if it was a thin veil, was not unusual in radical periodicals in the 1940s and 1950s as a means to prevent employer reprisals in the age of Joseph McCarthy. It was one thing to be a socialist or a homosexual or even to be known as such to acquaintances. It was quite another level of commitment to put one’s name on documents that might lead to persecution in the press, the workplace, or a court of law.

The precepts of “Socialism and Sex” were well within the range of views tolerated within the organization. Indeed, H. L. Small may have had reason to believe they might actually be adopted, given that they might be seen as a mere logical extension of the several varieties of libertarian socialism espoused by YPSL members. YPSL members in the 1950s exhibited, for example, a strong interest in Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish-German revolutionary socialist who supported the Russian Revolution but was critical of the early Soviet state for its ominous consolidation of power.<sup>17</sup> That the *Young Socialist* would publish such an article at all without disclaimer or controversy is testament to the scope of its internal freedom.

None of this is to say that the YPSL was free from homophobia or that a culture of complete openness prevailed on sexual matters within the

<sup>16</sup>Bogdan Denitch, email message to the author, 19 August 2006.

<sup>17</sup>The point is not that Rosa Luxemburg would necessarily have supported gay and lesbian liberation but rather that the YPSLs were more attracted to revolutionary socialism than some accounts of the Socialist Party as “social democracy” imagine and that in their discussions of 1952 the YPSLs presumed that freedom, democracy, and socialism were indissoluble, making fertile ground for the advocacy of sexual liberation. *Young Socialist* carried advertisements for editions of Luxemburg’s writings sold by the Young Socialists. One of its factions, spearheaded by Bogdan Denitch (and subsequently joined by Michael Harrington), called itself the Luxemburg Tendency.

organization, since nowhere in the United States was that true at the time. The atmosphere that prevailed within the group was a peculiar admixture of freedom and caution, acceptance and denial, silence and honesty. David McReynolds, a YPSL in Los Angeles who came to terms with his attraction to men in 1949, says: "Generally, in those days, it just wasn't discussed. . . . It wasn't tolerance but rather 'look the other way.' The Socialist Party always had a strong streak of 'libertarianism' on such matters. What we would have done if the member was a flaming queen I don't know. But so long as it was not pushed in our faces we didn't care. Nor was it discussed—so far as I know—in our groups on the West Coast."<sup>18</sup> Vern Davidson, who became a socialist as a freshman at UCLA in 1948 and who would later serve prison time for his resistance to compulsory military service during the Korean War, says that he had two serious male lovers when he was a YPSL and numerous same-sex encounters within Socialist Party circles, including many with men who were not homosexuals. Nevertheless, he recalls a conversation in which he took McReynolds aside to say, "David, you know, it would be a lot better if you just wouldn't be so gay, openly." He explains: "It was an issue, if we made a scene of it, but so was drinking. Drinking took you away from the cause. We had a real drunk party at the party headquarters in L.A., and boy did we catch hell for it. . . . Our position had nothing to do with being against homosexuality, but that it distracted from our *main* job which was to sell to a public the concept of socialism."<sup>19</sup> According to Ralph Shaffer, who attended many public meetings of the Socialist Party in southern California in the 1950s and on a few occasions paid membership dues, "'gayness' was not a topic of discussion." Nevertheless, he notes, it "was common knowledge—even for someone as naive as I was—that several male socialists were gay and it was accepted. . . . I don't recall that any of the CP/PP [Communist Party/Progressive Party] people were known as gays. Nor was the gayness of the SP [Socialist Party] men openly displayed. It was discreet."<sup>20</sup>

When Davidson moved to New York after he was elected national chairman of the YPSL in 1951, he participated in policy discussions of the very issues raised in the document "Socialism and Sex," conversations that very nearly resulted in a new plank in the Socialist Party platform:

Before the 1952 party convention, when I was still in New York, I was instructed by the YPSLs to attempt to put a homosexual rights plank before the platform committee. . . . That was my instructions. And I do know at the convention, I went into the convention, and I was a member

<sup>18</sup>David McReynolds, email message to the author, 27 August 2006.

<sup>19</sup>Vern Davidson, tape-recorded telephone interview by the author, 29 August 2006.

<sup>20</sup>Ralph Shaffer, email message to the author, 29 August 2006. The Progressive Party served as the vehicle for the left-wing New Dealer Henry Wallace's 1948 campaign, which was supported politically by the Communist Party in protest against the cold war policies of President Harry S. Truman. In the end, the Wallace campaign, badly isolated, was preponderantly composed of Communists and their fellow travelers. The Socialist Party ran Norman Thomas for president in 1948.

of the platform committee, and said, “The YPSL would like the party to consider a” —we didn’t use “gay rights” in that day, but a gay rights platform. We didn’t have any history to work from. There weren’t any of those things. You’ve got to remember how *much* things have changed. I was met with a lot of embarrassed-looking old codgers staring at me in a little horror, but not getting angry; it just shocked them that we had to talk about this nasty thing. But good old Norman Thomas, and he’s a sweet guy, said, “Well, Vern, if the YPSL thinks that’s something that we should consider, I certainly think that we should consider it, and I have nothing against it, but I wish you could draw up something and come back with it.” So I’ve always felt that I was the cause of all of this, because I tried and tried and tried, and I just couldn’t write anything that seemed to fit into the platform. So I let it slide by. I had no guidance. We didn’t talk about “discrimination because of sexual preference” in those days. That phrase would never have come to me. And everything was going fast, we were fighting over the war and everything, and it didn’t get done. And I take responsibility. But I believe to this day, had I been able to do my job Thomas would have joined me, and we could have had it back then, in ’52.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the marginality of socialism in the 1950s, such a plank, had the Socialist Party adopted it, would have been nothing less than a historic breakthrough in American political life. This episode goes unreported in existing accounts of the Socialist Party or the American left, suggesting that there would be value in further research into the Socialist Party’s sexual politics. Is there, for example, some connection between this early history and the Socialist Party USA’s role almost thirty years later, in 1980, as the first party in the history of the United States to nominate an openly gay man, David McReynolds, for president?

Much further research is warranted on same-sex desire and the anti-Stalinist left, both its social-democratic and revolutionary socialist variants. Anti-Stalinist radicals known or believed to have had lovers of the same sex include the Harlem Renaissance poet and novelist Claude McKay; Trotskyist poet John Brooks Wheelwright; poet and film critic Parker Tyler, who wrote for the Trotskyist *New Internationalist* as early as 1938 and was in the Workers Party and Independent Socialist League subsequently; Bayard Rustin, pacifist advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Tom Kahn, a Yipsel in the late 1950s and lover of Rustin who helped organize the March on Washington in 1963 before becoming a high-ranking union official in the AFL-CIO trade union federation. Dwight Macdonald’s iconoclastic periodical *Politics* published Robert Duncan’s pathbreaking “The Homosexual in Society” in 1944, and in his phase as a semi-Trotskyist “libertarian socialist” the novelist Norman Mailer wrote a sympathetic piece for *ONE* entitled “The

<sup>21</sup>Davidson interview.

Homosexual Villain” in 1954. To be sure, the anti-Stalinist left was also capable of censorious approaches to homosexuality. The largest Trotskyist party in the United States, for example, the Socialist Workers Party, expelled its known gay members for several decades until 1970.<sup>22</sup>

The actual identity of the author of the article “Socialism and Sex,” H. L. Small, remains obscure.<sup>23</sup> Most likely the writer was male, since a majority of YPSLs were male and since movement veterans remember no apparent lesbian members.<sup>24</sup> This obscurity of identity makes it impossible to trace the forebears who influenced the writer of “Socialism and Sex.” Nevertheless, the document may be situated within an international heritage of left-wing support for sexual freedom espoused by such earlier figures as Oscar Wilde, Edward Carpenter, Alexandra Kollontai, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Emma Goldman, Magnus Hirschfeld, and André Gide.

<sup>22</sup>While many of these figures and episodes are obscure, others have been well chronicled. Bayard Rustin’s experiences, for example, are brilliantly reconstructed in John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). For the specific articles cited above see Robert Duncan, “The Homosexual in Society,” *Politics* 1, no. 7 (1944): 209–11; Norman Mailer, “The Homosexual Villain” (1954), reprinted in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959; New York: G. P. Putnam’s, 1970), 203–11. The debate within the Socialist Workers Party over how to relate to the gay liberation movement is reprised in David Thorstad, ed., *Gay Liberation and Socialism: Documents from the Discussions on Gay Liberation inside the Socialist Workers Party (1970–1973)* (New York: David Thorstad, 1976), and Steve Forgiione, Kurt T. Hill, and David Thorstad, eds., *No Apologies: The Unauthorized Publications of Internal Discussion Documents of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) Concerning Lesbian/Gay Male Liberation. Part 2, 1975–79* (New York: Lesbian/Gay Rights Monitoring Group, 1980).

<sup>23</sup>In addition to the correspondence with Denitch and McReynolds and interviews with Davidson and Shaffer cited above, personal recollections were tape-recorded in telephone interviews with R. W. Tucker on 31 August 2006 and with Maggie Phair on 2 September 2006. None of these veterans of the 1950s socialist left claimed authorship of “Socialism and Sex” or even remembered its existence, nor were they able to recall H. L. Small or anyone who used that name as a pseudonym. Most of those consulted were major national leaders of the Young Socialists. They served in several geographical regions of the organization as well as on both sides of an emerging internal faction fight that would end very soon after the publication of “Socialism and Sex.” Much of the membership broke away in 1952 to collaborate with the Socialist Youth League (SYL), the affiliate of the Independent Socialist League (ISL) led by Max Shachtman, and eventually joined with the SYL to form the Young Socialist League (YSL) in 1954. Part of the youth remained behind with the Socialist Party, reverting in name to the Young People’s Socialist League. In 1958 the YSL would reunite with the YPSL after the ISL dissolved and its members joined the Socialist Party (at that time called the SP-SDF because of its 1956 reunification with the Social-Democratic Federation, which had split off from the party in 1936). Those unfamiliar with the political history of the left may not realize that such couplings and divorces, however confusing they may be to outsiders, are quite characteristic of radicalism, which is driven by emergent political differences and convergences as well as by temperamental differences. H. L. Small’s position in relation to the faction fight is not clear; on the one hand, the document opens by putting down “democratic-liberal” sentiment, which would suggest a left-wing outlook, but, on the other, it upholds certain states in Western Europe as “socialist or semi-socialist,” which would suggest a moderate social democratic viewpoint.

<sup>24</sup>Harry Siitonen, email message to the author, 29 September 2006, and David McReynolds, email message to the author, 29 September 2006.

This tradition combined acceptance (and often celebration) of same-sex love with social and political radicalism. Although it was beleaguered at midcentury by the consolidation of Stalinism and further menaced by cold war repression and homophobia, this historical current had many of the democratic and libertarian proclivities often attributed to the new left of the 1960s, a decade when a freewheeling form of radicalism would indeed come to be espoused more widely, even if it was not “new” in the sense of being unprecedented.<sup>25</sup>

In several other senses “Socialism and Sex” prefigured the 1960s. It urged socialists to understand the genesis of political commitment and their ultimate goals in a capacious sense, transcending narrowly economic terms.<sup>26</sup> It treated sexuality as a political issue, comprehending the interrelationship between personal and public in a manner strikingly similar to the subsequent feminist position that “the personal is political.”<sup>27</sup> While the scant intellectual resources available to a young person exploring such questions in the early 1950s lent the article a modest temperament, the document contains in embryonic form the admixture of socialism and gay liberation that would find more militant, revolutionary expression in the post-Stonewall explosion of such groups as the Gay Liberation Front. For all of these reasons, “Socialism and Sex” is a striking piece of evidence that has significance for a more comprehensive sexual history of the political left and stands as an arresting, if brief, forerunner of modern gay civil rights consciousness.

#### APPENDIX: THE COMPLETE TEXT OF “SOCIALISM AND SEX”

BY H. L. SMALL

The growth of socialism in the United States has been hampered by the lack of imagination of the leaders of socialist thought. The appeal of the socialist

<sup>25</sup>For useful histories of the libidinal left, if largely centered upon Europe, see Gert Hekma, Harry Oosterhuis, and James Steakley, eds., *Gay Men and the Sexual History of the Political Left* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995), which was simultaneously published as a special double issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* 29, nos. 2/3 and 4 (1995); David Renton, “The Life and Politics of David Widgery,” *Left History* 8, no. 1 (2002): 7–31; and David Berry, “Workers of the World, Embrace! Daniel Guérin, the Labour Movement and Homosexuality,” *Left History* 9, no. 2 (2004): 11–43.

<sup>26</sup>The connection between a postcapitalist imagination and the transcendence of the economic as a major theme in postwar social thought has been traced well by Howard Brick, *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (New York: Twayne, 1998) and *Transcending Capitalism: Visions of a New Society in Modern American Thought* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>27</sup>Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000).

has always been to the future, with a paradisaical [*sic*] vision of economic plentitude and true democratic freedom. That is—the level of appeal has been a mixture of economic and social goods and leisure in a milieu of democratic-liberal sentiment. This has been good but not good enough.

In a time of comparative plentitude, or at least not economic deprivation, one cannot gain adherents as during a depression. The gaining of new people as potential socialists, as potential subscribers to the socialist program, has to be directed toward interests that are immediate and practical today. It has to be directed towards areas of circumscription of society that are vital to their individual happiness and which, if presented to them as political problems will give them an idea of the type of freedom that can be maintained in a free American socialist society.

The freedom of the legally-of-age adult of both sexes to have sexual relations with whomever he or she wishes of the same or opposite sex, without fear of sanction is an important libertarian principle that is part of the law in many socialist and semi-socialist countries today, e.g. in Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, etc. It means, to the individual “deviant” that the fear of legal sanction, as well as illegal repression, blackmail, etc. are forever banished from his mind. It means an area of operational freedom that will enable the emancipated individual to work and think more effectively in his tasks of everyday life. It means the difference between health and sickness for thousands of people who are non-productive members of society today.

It can be argued that sexual deviancy is a mark of ill health in the first place, but it was also argued, with equal clarity and legality, at one time, that it was the mark of the devil—or at least the pagan gods. The point is this: whether we individually consider it right or wrong, healthy or unhealthy, to have a large or small vocabulary of libidinal expression, repression of such expression, or practice under fear, does not make for a whole, productive individual.

Propaganda aimed toward the sexual individualist should stress his importance as a political concern; it should point out his right to what the Declaration of Independence called the “pursuit of happiness.” This soon will make more and more people aware of socialism as a constructive force in the transformation of America into a truly happy country where the individual rights of all its people (regardless of their departure from the Puritan “norm”) are both observed and respected.

It may at first be considered jokingly but the principle is at the root of political effectiveness. *Be concerned with what your people are concerned*—that is, with real issues, not straw men—issues that hit at the very vitals of the people. Those who will see socialist literature on this level for the first time will be interested in the program as a whole, for they have already made the first step toward conversion. They have realized that their interests are our interests. Perhaps then more people shall consider what we have to offer.