

Bridging the divide between queer theory sage and anarchism

Benjamin Shepard
Sexualities 2010 13: 511
DOI: 10.1177/1363460710370656

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://sex.sagepub.com/content/13/4/511>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Sexualities* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://sex.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://sex.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://sex.sagepub.com/content/13/4/511.refs.html>

Bridging the divide between queer theory and anarchism

Benjamin Shepard

New York College of Technology/City University of
New York, USA

Sexualities

13(4) 511–527

© The Author(s) 2010

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1363460710370656

sex.sagepub.com



Abstract

Much of the struggle for a queer public commons involves tactics and philosophical understandings embraced by anarchists and queers alike. A few of these overlapping positions include: an embrace of the insurrectionary possibilities of pleasure; a rejection of social controls and formal hierarchies in favor of mutual aid networks and DIY community building; the use of direct action; and a culture of resistance. The interconnections between these movements are often under-theorized and under-valued. Yet, rather than build on these linkages, much of today's queer theory finds itself facing a divide separating theory from practice. This article explores this divide in relation to historically-informed examples of current queer activist practices in which queers and anarchists share common cause. The examples highlight the links between anarchism and efforts aimed at reproductive health and sexual self-determination, public assembly, and battles against social prohibitions and vice squads. The article concludes with a call for a mutual engagement between queer activism and anarchism.

Keywords

autonomy, Church Ladies for Choice, Emma Goldman, praxis, queer theory

The other night, I took a stroll into St Mark's Bookstore in the East Village of New York City. First, I perused the queer studies section. Unlike a decade ago, there were very few new titles, with the exception of works on gay marriage. Next I walked over to the section on anarchism and it seemed to have quadrupled since my last visit to the store. While the dearth of books on queer theory compared to works on anarchism could be explained away with any number of excuses about academic press distribution, it seemed to reflect a growing concern about the

Corresponding author:

Benjamin Shepard, New York College of Technology/City University of New York, USA

Email: bshepard@citytech.cuny.edu

relevance of queer theory to movements for social change (Kirsch, 2000). While anarchism has increasingly supported and informed social movements (Graeber, 2004a, 2004b), queer theory has suffered from a seeming inability to speak beyond the confines of the academy or itself (Hall, 2003; Mattilda, 2004; McLemee, 2009). There was, after all, a time when queer activism and theory informed each other and the movements they supported (Crimp, 2002; Warner, 1993, 1999). Yet, just as anarchism has become further rooted in global movements, queer theory has come to feel distant from the politics that once fueled it. Some have come to argue that queer theory needs to reinfuse itself within authentic social struggles (Kirsch, 2000; McLemee, 2009). This article proposes queer theory embrace its philosophical interconnections with anti-authoritarian organizing. It explores a few of the historic links as well as conflicts between anarchism and queer politics, considering the divide between these two traditions of activism, as well as their interconnections via distinct case examples of anti-authoritarian organizing involving rejection of social controls, vice squads, and criminalization of protest and dissent. Queer and anarchist politics overlap in any number of ways. The article explores how.

Throughout the last decade I have participated in the cross-pollination between queer/AIDS activism and anarchist-inspired global justice movements in New York, with all their fits and starts, and occasional successes. To make sense of these experiences, I have employed an autoethnographic approach to consider the links and conflicts between queer and anarchist organizing traditions. Here my participant observations are compared with historical evidence, theory, and interviews with key actors (Butters, 1983; Juris, 2007). My aim is to come to a closer understanding of the interconnections and conflicts between these movements. While the interviews featured are all with men; I hope the project highlights the ways such activists contribute to a multi-issue, multi-gender, anarchist queer organizing ethos that Emma Goldman helped articulate as she romped around the city a century ago.

Queer and anarchist politics

Queers and anarchists have long shared a similar disposition toward sexual politics. Sharing a kindred spirit with the early Victorian sex radicals in the UK (Sears, 1977), anarchists were particularly influenced by the campaigns to end the British Contagious Diseases Act of 1864. Faced with a law which authorized police to 'investigate and inspect', quarantine, and criminalize suspected prostitutes, activists embraced an anti-statist approach (O'Kelly, 1993a, 1993b). Influential, anarchist queer writer Daniel Guerin (1970: 13) suggests that at its core, anarchism is a 'visceral revolt' against such models of state control (also see Berry, 2004). In the years to follow, homosexual desire and sexual freedom became primary topics for anarchists, who developed common cause with sexual outsiders (Kissack, 2008).

Conversely, early gay liberationists organized in a fashion that echoed anarchist sentiments toward freedom of the mind, body, and spirit. Yet, this could only take

place when the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) rejected a Mattachine politics of respectability in favor of an anarchist impulse toward radical egalitarianism (McLemee, 2009). The anarchist-queer chant, '2-4-6-8, smash the church, smash the state!' was a constant at early gay liberation rallies and actions (Teal, 1995 [1971]). A report on GLF's 30th anniversary was titled 'Anarchy Inc' after the nickname of one of the members for the group (Blotcher, 1999).

Author J.P. Harpignies (2009), who lived in New York at the time of the riots, recalls this feeling in streets of June 1969. Harpignies was organizing with a group at New York University called Transcendental Students (TS). Self-described anarchists, the group transformed an old restaurant, Harouts, on Waverly Place into a community space.

Not that long into TS's managing of the Harout's space, members of GLF dropped by after a run-in with the police. There, 'what seemed like a few hundred of NYC's wildest drag queens and militant gay activists at the height of their early excitement about their emergence as a potent social force, poured in and began to dance wildly and to party ferociously', recalls Harpignies. 'Their energy and their variety of appearance and dress and plumage was truly extraordinary'. Harpignies stared 'mouth-agape. . . It seemed like a typhoon that was so powerful the idea of trying to rein it in never even came up. I've never seen that wild a scene again in my life'. Few in TS had witnessed such an ethos of sexual freedom, combined with anti-authoritarian politics. 'We had never seen people as totally rebellious and seemingly fearless as these folks, so we felt a sort of awe and respect for them'.

In years to come, Gay Liberation would expand into a global movement (Teal, 1995 [1971]). Its aim was not just liberation for queers, but liberation of sexuality for everyone (Altman, 1972). The movement borrowed from a range of influences including anarchism, to help articulate the meanings of its aspirations. 'Thanks to Emma Goldman for the title', Gayle Rubin (1975) wrote in her essay 'The Traffic of Women', acknowledging the influence of anarchism on her thinking. With this essay, Rubin incorporated anarchism into sexual politics and an interplay between Marxism and psychoanalysis in a way that anticipated and influenced queer theory.

None of this is to suggest the interconnections between anarchist thinking and queer activism have been smooth. Liberal-minded gays actually departed from GLF to form their own group, the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) shortly after GLF was formed (Teal, 1995 [1971]). In the years to come the split between assimilationist-minded gays and queers who hoped to link gay liberation with broad-based movements for social and sexual freedom would only grow (Crimp, 2002; Sedgwick, 1990). Liberals and radicals battled each other throughout the ACT UP years, echoing the previous generation's conflicts (Crimp, 2002; Shepard, 2009). Assimilationist-minded gays would disavow their movement's linkages with broad-based social movements for social and sexual freedom, instead favoring the rights of gays to fit in, shop, marry, and join the army (Goldstein, 2002; Warner, 1999). Queer activists challenged this line of thinking, railing against the cultural erasure of assimilation (Brown, 2007; Mattilda, 2004). People are different is the first axiom of Eve Sedgwick's (1990) queer theory.

Yet, this thinking had become increasingly isolated, its influence felt separated from much of mainstream political debate.

Between theory and praxis

Certainly intellectuals and academics helped infuse a critical theory into the work of ACT UP and SexPanic! and vice versa (Crimp, 2002; Hall, 2003; Halperin, 1995). Yet the field and the activism supporting it seemed to hit a creative brick wall when facing the politics of neoliberalism, urban space, and quality of life politics in the late 1990s (Crimp, 2002; Duggan, 2004). And some suggested the field retreated when it was unable to influence such developments (Shepard, 2009). It is easier, after all, to theorize about a problem than to solve it (Kirsh, 2000). Others argued that much of queer theoretical writing had disengaged from activism, become obtuse, and only accessible to academics (McLemee, 2009; Rogue and Shannon, 2008).

A few examples help illustrate the point. 'So many people are so constipated', explained Jay Blotcher (2007), a long-time activist and observer of the queer scene in New York. 'They think that they have a handle on sex but they are lobbing grenades from the ivory tower'. And the embodied aspects of queer world-making are obscured. 'They apply a lot of polysyllabic words to the experience. And that's a distancing factor'.

'Let me give you a salient moment where academia fell short of the reality of it', Blotcher continued. In the early 2000s, NYU sponsored a symposium titled, 'Queer Nation, What Happened?' It included not just academics but also activist Alan Klein, one of the founders of Queer Nation. 'Alan got to speak first. Alan is as far from an academic as you can get. But he knows his stuff', Blotcher explained. 'Alan said Queer Nation began because ACT UP was becoming crowded with agendas. Therefore the occasional queer issues that found their way into ACT UP... were looked upon with much more selectivity', Blotcher elaborated. 'Alan got together with his lover, Karl Soehnlein [and some others], and said "let's create another group that can address this"'. Klein related this story and passed the mike. 'Well, it is as if he hadn't talked', Blotcher moaned. 'The following speaker ruminated, "the reason Queer Nation began was because of the Zeitgeist, the dialectic this", blah, blah... And Alan looked like he'd been slapped across his face', Blotcher recalled. 'Sometimes reality is less glamorous than you want it. Queer Nation sprung from queer pragmatism. The rest came from that'. The academics on the panel ignored Klein's lived experience with the group. 'It reinvigorated my distrust and sometimes disgust with intellect, academia specifically, when it comes to on the ground, in the trenches activism', Blotcher concluded.

The details of this story are less important than the sentiment. The story Blotcher relates is anything but uncommon. In recent years, any number of observers have had similar experiences (see e.g. Mattilda, 2004; McLemee, 2009; Nyong'o, 2008). Part of the problem is that much of academia seeks to distance itself from the politics or culture of anti-authoritarian activism, which has so profoundly influenced queer

organizing and vice versa (Brown, 2007; Graeber, 2004a, 2004b; Nyong'o, 2008; Ritchie, 2008). While queer theory has relegated activism to its periphery, anarchism has increasingly linked its critique within activist practices. '[I]t is primarily concerned with forms of practice', writes David Graeber (2004b). Yet, if the examples given earlier suggest anything, it is that in many circles queer theory has come to ignore the practices Graeber describes. While there are any number of queer activists involved in direct action and anarchist(ic) movements, many theorists seem to have walked away from the practices, writings, or questions involved with the activism which long once fueled queer theory.

There are any number of ways to interpret this. Yet, one could argue that queer theory faces a divide between theory and practice, resulting in a diminished praxis. The term praxis is generally used to describe a 'kind of self creating action', writes Martin Jay (1973: 4). 'one of the earmarks of praxis as opposed to mere action was its being informed by theoretical considerations' (Jay, 1973). Social change activism is thought to involve 'the unifying of theory and praxis' (1973). This ethos is what seems to be missing from today's queer theory.

Anarchist queer

Jamie Heckert (2006: 14) writes: 'Were queer theory to draw upon the rich heritage of anarchism and acknowledge the anarchistic elements of its own heritage', it just might find its way out of its current impasse. 'What might "street" queer theory look like?' Rogue and Shannon (2008) wonder. It might reflect some of the queer and anarchist organizing practices taking place in the squats, gardens, small towns and social movements taking shape across the globe. While queer theory and anarchism are often viewed as mutually exclusive terms, they need not be. They share a great deal of common ground, built of an active cross-over between anarchist and queer issues and actions. The following highlights a few overlapping themes.

Rejection of the paternalistic state – queers and anarchists alike view the state with a basic skepticism. When the state proclaims civil liberties must be sacrificed in order to protect citizens from social outsiders, both camps share a similar critical disposition. Both favor self-organization in the pursuit of alternative spaces for social connection (Graeber, 2004a, 2004b; Warner, 1999). Within their support of DIY approaches to community building, use over exchange, pleasure over procreation, they both share a similar critical view of capitalism (Brown, 2007; Duggan, 2004; Mattilda, 2004). This is not to suggest such a disposition is monolithic; it is not. There are LGBT and even queer activists as well as anarchists who preclude an anti-capitalism from their analysis (Goldstein, 2002; Guerin, 1970), yet for the most part, both camps share an emphasis on the use of space for alternate means to accumulation; they approach building space with an emphasis on pleasure and direct democracy rather than profit-making (Amster et al., 2009; Brown, 2007; Holtzman et al., 2004).

Both anarchism and queer theory borrow from a range of influences to support *a politics of freedom*. Here, freedom supports collective self-determination, mutual aid, a rejection of patriarchy, and space to make choices about one's life

(Brown, 2007; Goldman, 1969; Highleyman (1995 [1988]; O'Kelly, 1993a). 'Both projects argue for a need to move beyond hierarchical and naturalized arrangements of socially constructed identities', note Rogue and Shannon (2008). This is a politics organized around the realization of respect for people's needs. Rather than individualism, it is about the seeking of freedom via a wide range of expressions. While much of life under capitalism involves disciplining of the body, this politics puts a premium on explosive experiences, dynamism and experimentation. Herbert Marcuse described such a politics in terms of 'polymorphous perverse' sexuality, which extended from bodily experiences into an abundant approach toward social change. The Red Butterfly Collective, a splinter group from GLF, is a good example. 'Human liberation', it argued 'in all its forms, including Gay Liberation, requires effective self-determination, i.e. democracy, in all spheres of social life affecting the lives of people as a whole'. The collective's motto lifted directly from Marcuse: 'Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros is the political fight', (quoted in Escoffier, n.d.).

Anarchism and queer politics support *a critique of the normative* assumptions about the world (Goldman, 2001 [1923]; Kissack, 2008; Warner, 1993). Both emphasize practices, rather than fixed social or cultural identities (Amster et al., 2009; Hall, 2003; Sedgwick, 1990). Both support free will and choice, favoring the consent of those involved, not the approval of government or religious institutions (Highleyman, 1995 [1988]). This sentiment echoes Emma Goldman's (1969) argument that matrimony was another form of wage slavery and exploitation. Rather than marriage, anarchist queers support alternative social groupings, sexual self-determination and safer promiscuity (Brown, 2007; Highleyman 1995 [1988]; Ritchie, 2008; Mattilda, 2004).

Concurrently, anarchism and queer politics share a mutual *respect for pleasure* (Ritchie, 2008). Mikhail Bakunin laid the ground work for an anarchist rejection of fruitless forms of social and sexual prohibition, later taken up by anarchists such as *Joy of Sex* author Alexander Comfort. 'Liberty alone can bring moral improvement', writes Daniel Guerin, paraphrasing Bakunin's work (1970: 32). 'Far from checking the spread of immorality, repression has always extended and deepened it', Guerin (1970: 32) elaborates. Contemporary queer theory echoes the anti-authoritarian rejection of social and sexual prohibitions Guerin describes. 'There is an ethical urgency about queer theory that is directed at the damage that sexual prohibitions and discriminations do to people', Eve Sedgwick explains (cited in Smith, 1998: B9).

As opposed to sexual shame, both fields argue that fantastic possibilities take shape when people share social eros. Such eros can be thought of as a social connection and attraction among minds, spirits, and bodies of people (Escoffier, n.d.). Not necessarily sex, social eros speaks to the possibilities that take shape among people free to build alternative social relations around care, adventure, pleasure, and responsibility for each other and the communities in which they thrive. 'Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free groupings of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth', argues Emma Goldman (1969: 62),

'an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires'.

In order to achieve the levels of 'full enjoyment' Goldman refers to, anarchist queers have fashioned a politics based on autonomy from state social controls, as well as coercive social mores. The implications of such thinking are many. 'To be autonomous is not to be alone or to act in any way one chooses – a law unto oneself – but to act with regards for others, to feel responsibility for others', write the editors of *Notes from Nowhere* (2003). 'This is the crux of autonomy, an ethic of responsibility and reciprocity that comes through recognition that others both desire and are capable of autonomy too' (2003: 110). People are different; they have different needs and desires as Bakunin argues (quoted in *Anarcho*, 2001). What one person finds repulsive, others find delicious, tantalizing and risky.

'Sooner or later, happily or unhappily, almost everyone fails to control his or her sex life' writes Michael Warner (1999: 1). Yet, it is typically those on the margins – the sex workers, sexually-generous queers, and women who have had children out of wedlock – who must contend with the ramifications and condemnations. 'Shouldn't it be possible to allow everyone sexual autonomy, in a way consistent with everyone's sexual autonomy?' Warner muses (1999). One would hope. Yet, as Kissack (2008) and Sears (1977) point out, queer anarchists have long struggled for sexual self-determination, often out of necessity. Sexual autonomy, after all, requires more than rejecting social restrictions, controls, or unjust laws, Warner notes: 'It requires access to pleasures and possibilities, since people commonly do not know their desires until they find them' (1999: 7).

The result of such explorations is an abundant approach to sexual self-determination and community building, in which sexual self-determination is a very part of movement organizing. 'Women should be building our movement the way we make love – gradually with sustained involvement, limitless endurance – and, of course, multiple orgasms', as anarchist feminist Jo Freeman put it in 1972. More than physical experience, Freeman refers to an ethos of desire, expression and the possibility that people can do things on their own terms. Such a politics connects notions of pleasure and direct democracy, experienced in multiple forms.

The theatrics of the Stonewall-era queer performance group the Cockettes embodies such an ethos. 'From the very beginning everything was fun, nice way to be together, be ourselves and do our bit for sexual freakdom', Scrumbly, one of the Cockettes, reflected. 'Anarchy ideally is a wonderful system. If it feels good, go along with the game' (Tent, 2004: 18). 'It was total sexual anarchy', John Waters recalls (Gamson, 2005: 55). Rejecting pre-Stonewall repression, the Cockettes tilted the scales toward creativity. In doing so, The Cockettes offered a theatre of transgression, their shows were performances in sexual liberation, via a topsy-turvy carnival-like interplay as audience and performers shared a space for social connection, pleasure, and democratic exchange. Theirs was an embodiment of a liberation era ethos of communal living, mutual care, disdain for capitalism, and respect for pleasure (Gamson, 2005; Tent, 2004). More than sexuality, the Cockettes reveled in a distinct and absurd politics of play.

Crafted and created by such activists, play offers solutions to myriad challenges. It connects activism with camp, irony, humor, and a respect for pleasure and group solidarity. This approach perfunctorily rejects a macho brand of activist heroics (Crimp, 2002). Play is not a rejection of activism, but rather a unique amplification of it. Linked with aesthetic and organizing projects, play becomes an arena in which to explore alternative social and cultural possibilities (Shepard, 2009).

While queers have long recognized pleasure as a resource, they share this disposition with anarchists (Brown, 2007; Ritchie, 2008). *Fifth Estate*, an anti-authoritarian magazine, recently ran a special issue dedicated to play. 'Party like its 1929' the lead editorial declared. 'To discuss the radical persistence of pleasure might seem rather decadent', the editors wrote. But, 'we want to remind our readers and ourselves that one facet that has always distinguished anarchists and anarchy from other flavors of resistance and visions of society is our insistence of the revolutionary nature of joy' (Fifth Estate, 2008: 3).

Over the years, queer anarchists have built on this ethos to support a *culture of resistance*. While anarchists refer to the DIY spaces they create as forms of dual power, in which autonomous publics coexist within the structures of state power (Graeber, 2004a, 2004b), queers have come to recognize these public commons as counter publics (Mattilda, 2004; Warner, 1999). Such networks are buttressed within an emphasis on mutual aid and families of choice, which support close ties between the collective and the individual (Brown, 2007). Whether supporting a public sexual culture, a street party, a zine, or other forms of direct action, these symbols of freedom contribute to cultures of resistance (Ritchie, 2008).

Much of this cultural project takes shape via a DIY approach, which emphasizes various forms of creative direct action (Highleyman, 1995 [1988]; Holtzman et al., 2004). The efficacy of such practices involves the space for people to find agency, engage, and speak out (Goldman, 2001 [1923]). Such approaches involve not only challenging unjust laws, but organizing alternative solutions. A few examples help demonstrate the point. The final section of this article highlights campaigns in which queers and anarchists shared common cause while building on an anti-authoritarian organizing agenda organized around rejection of social controls, vice squads, and criminalization of protest and dissent.

Case 1. Sexual self-determination, reproductive autonomy: from Emma Goldman to the Church Ladies for Choice

On 31 May 2009, Dr George Tiller, a US doctor who provided reproductive health services at a clinic in Wichita, Kansas, the home of Operation Rescue, was shot by an opponent of the procedure (Hegeman, 2009). After he heard, New York anarchist James Nova (2009) responded:

also tragic is that only when someone gets killed does anti-abortion terrorism get any press. When they burn clinics or smash windows, spit on, punch, and tackle defenders, employees, and patients it warrants no coverage. I've had hunting knives pulled on

me, been tripped, shoved and witnessed others being assaulted many times over the years. These psychos have the total support of nearly every local police department across the country. I have seen cops kneel and pray with the attackers. But they aren't classified as terrorists because they are CHRISTIAN!

The first case study considers the efforts of queer and anarchist activists to defend such clinics. The coalition has deep roots. Emma Goldman (1916), after all, was arrested after speaking about abortion in violation of the Comstock Law in New York.

Over the years, queers and anarchists would continue to battle the prohibitive politics of Comstock's ilk. Between Goldman's arrest in 1916 and Operation Rescue's Summer of Mercy protests in 1991, when the group sent thousands of activists to block access to abortion clinics, debate over the practice has continued (Hegeman, 2009). 'When I was at Berkeley, my political involvement was basically with women's reproductive rights', explained queer activist Brian Griffin, who went on to join ACT UP. 'To me homophobia and misogyny are the same thing. It's all about hating the female and boys acting like girls'.

A primary tactic of abortion opponents is to organize a vigil at an abortion clinic. The Students for Life of America, or SFLA (2007) lists steps to organizing a clinic vigil:

1. 'Choose a clinic'
2. 'Announce the vigil'
3. 'Know the laws'
4. 'Gather materials for your vigil...with pictures of both living and aborted babies', and
5. 'Be a witness for life at the clinic'. (SFLA, 2007)

What SFLA does not mention are the efforts of abortion opponents to harass or intimidate clinic clients, often screaming, 'You're murdering your baby' (Bader, 2005). In response, queers have organized a practice known as clinic defense.

Over the last few years, I have attended clinic defense at the Ambulatory Center in South Brooklyn. In November 2007, I went with the Church Ladies for Choice, an ACT UP spin-off group, members of the Radical Homosexual Agenda, the New York Metro Alliance of Anarchists, and the Brooklyn Pro-Choice Network. The Rude Mechanical Orchestra performed that overcast Saturday morning. The Church Ladies and company stood on one side of a barricade at the entrance to the clinic. On the other side, a group of pro-life activists held rosaries and a replica of a dead bloody fetus; they offered diapers to those willing to be turned away. The Church Ladies juxtapose that energy with a display of silly humor, undermining the atmosphere through irreverent songs. Most of their songs are culture jams of classic melodies rewritten as pro-choice anthems. One crowd pleaser is 'Christian-fascio-Nazi-nutso-psycho-right-wing-buuull-shit', written to the tune of Mary Poppins' 'Super-cali-fragilistic-expealidocious'. (Church Ladies, 2005).

'My church lady name is Harmonie Moore', explained Brian Griffin in an interview in 2006. 'Back in the early days of ACT UP, a chant was invented, "how many more have to die?" And after chanting it repeatedly, hours on end at demonstrations, it became "Harmonie Moore has to die?" And people used to say, "Who is this poor woman Harmonie Moore and why does she have to die?"' So, as the Church Ladies were coming together, Griffin, adopted the chant as his own moniker and became Harmonie Moore. Each of the Church Ladies' performances highlight the implicit links between women's health, reproductive autonomy, choice, and HIV prevention. Yet, they do it with a politics which links the lessons of queer activism and feminism translated through jokes and songs.

The Church Ladies are part of a long lineage of DIY queer performance groups, dating back to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and even the Cockettes. 'I was always fascinated with the Cockettes', Griffin explained. 'I think the Church Ladies go over much better in New York than say the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. . . I think we fit well here in New York. . . we're far more given toward irony'.

'When I moved to New York one of the things, in terms of getting involved with this city, I noticed everywhere I was going there were these boys with "Silence = Death" and ACT UP t-shirts, Griffin explains. 'I thought I should go to a meeting because these are the people that are looking where I'm looking and I'll probably make friends there', Griffin continued. Most of Griffin's friends volunteered with New York's Gay Men's Health Crisis, a highly formalized organization. 'And that's not me', Griffin explained. ACT UP's culture of play was far more appealing. 'So combined with the fact that I was seeing all these attractive men, that I wanted to meet, I started going to ACT UP meetings'. Once there, he was absorbed into the activist culture, especially after he met future co-conspirator reproductive rights activist Elizabeth Meixell. 'When Elizabeth came up to me to say she wanted to have the Church Ladies for Choice, I swear it was like a light bulb', Griffin recalled. 'I know exactly what I want to do with this. I know it's the next step through the Cockettes, through the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence'.

So Griffin and Meixell founded the Church Ladies with a group of activists from Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM) and ACT UP. The first demonstration was at an event WHAM had planned outside St Patrick's Cathedral. Karen Finley showed up as the Mother of God. 'And there were four of us', Griffin explained. 'I had a red dress and a sign. We had this moving picket and we would laugh and giggle with Elizabeth feeding us chants'.

Someone walked up to Griffin and asked him, "'Aren't you making fun of religion?" I said, "Well yes". She had no comment. "Yea, what's the problem?"' While only a few of the Church Ladies are anarchists, the group cohered within an anti-authoritarian stance. 'When in doubt, make fun of the Religious Right' became their creed.

Much of the potency of the Church Lady repertoire involves its camp embrace of bad taste, the subversive possibilities of humor, and play. Another popular song at Clinic Defense is 'Chop It Off', a homage to Lorena Bobbitt, a US housewife who cut off the penis of her abusive husband. The song takes on the misogyny of a

culture of rape, using humor to delight in the lessons of a woman who fought back. Staring straight at the 'antis' during clinic defense the Church Ladies sing to the tune of *Jingle Bells*:

Listen up you boys
 We don't want to confuse
 There's something that you have
 That you don't want to lose . . .
 So you should *always* ask!
 And be polite, you see,
 Or clap won't be the only thing
 That hurts you when you pee!! Oh!

Chorus

Chop it off! Chop it off!
 Use a kitchen knife
 Teach him he can't rape you just because you are his wife
 OW!!! . . .
 If he tries to rape you . . . well, he has to sleep sometime!
 (Church Ladies, 2005)

Harmonie Moore's favorite moments as a Church Lady are when he's actually able to make the antis laugh. Here, humor takes on any number of meanings. After all, those who laugh tend to participate in a shared meaning. Such humor undermines ideas, morals, and authority (Woodside, 2001). It helps regular people break through feelings of inhibition to act and play, liberating us from the confines of rationality and reason (Holt, 2008). And it gives us a means to engage. At least it feels like this when the Church Ladies perform.

Throughout the years, different Church Ladies have moved through the group; yet, the group has maintained an abiding faith in sexual self-determination, the importance of humor and culture as tools of resistance, and a belief in the freedom to speak out. Over time, even the struggle for public assembly would become embattled.

Case 2. Public assembly

Throughout the 1990s, many traditional meeting spaces for queers came under attack. In recent years, this process has only become increasingly pronounced. Driving the frenzy was a conservative urban regime that successfully justified its power grab as a morality campaign. Queer meeting places for social and sexual congress were shut down (Crimp, 2002). In response, queers would work with anarchists to defend, create, and preserve such spaces. Some were sex clubs, squats, cruising areas, and community gardens; others took shape as forms of public assembly, including street demonstrations, parties, and Critical Mass bike rides.

One of the leading groups to queer the right to public assembly is New York's Radical Homosexual Agenda (RHA), an affiliate of the New York Metro Alliance of Anarchists. Since 2007, the RHA (2008) has used direct action to champion notions of liberty. To do so, the group announced the 2007 Parade without a Permit after the city council speaker, lesbian Chris Quinn, cut a deal with the police department to curtail freedom of assembly for groups of 20 or more. '[J]ust as the police have the power to grant permits, they also have the power to deny them', the RHA would note (RHA, 2008). 'Why do the police decide who can assemble and who cannot?' Over the next two years, the group held parades, zapped politicians, disrupted city council hearings, and participated in unpermitted drag marches as well as many other forms of direct action.

For the 40th anniversary of Stonewall, the RHA organized another Parade without a Permit. 'Join us in the streets as we assert our freedom to assemble and celebrate our liberation', the call for the parade declared, highlighting the point that Gay Liberation began when queers fought back against abuses by the NYPD and inspired a riot (Teal, 1995 [1971]). 'Today, the infamous NYPD vice squad which raided the Stonewall bar in 1969 is still out in force entrapping and arresting queers'. It noted, 'Though [Mayor] Bloomberg and Quinn have worked hard to ensure that the NYPD repress the freedoms of straight and queer New Yorkers, our lives and our rage won't fit in their heavily policed parade routes' echoing the anarchist motto 'Our Dreams Won't Fit In Your Ballot Boxes!'

On 19 June 2009, the night of the action, I walked around Washington Square Park passing out flyers, announcing our parade, stopping to chat. 'You know the deal', I noted when I stumbled into a group of friends from Queer Fist and Reclaim the Streets. 'You guys are coming, right?' 'Of course', they assured me. Carrying a sign declaring, 'The Stonewall Veterans Never asked for a Permit', we walked us around Washington Square toward the exit. I was thinking we would take the streets once we got to 7th Ave, but looking behind me, my group of friends had cheerfully succeeded in taking it as we walked out of the park. 'Liberation, not assimilation, fuck that assimilation!!!' the group chanted. The joyous, campy declaration, 'We're here! We're queer! We're fabulous! Don't fuck with us!' followed. This spirit resonated throughout the night air. 'We will not be quiet! Stonewall was a riot!' we screamed as we approached the Stonewall Inn. The rally moved down Christopher Street, where a nightly street party takes place off the piers most every night. Many joined the parade. 'One onlooker stepped to the front of the banner and unleashed his inner baton twirler as the RHA drum corps pounded out a rhythm and led us in the chant, "This street is for faggots. F-A-G-G-O-T-S!"' (WeWANT You, 2009). Members of the NYPD trailed behind most of the night. Fortunately no arrests accompanied this celebration of a culture of resistance. The RHA were not the only group fighting the police in New York in 2009. The final case study highlights efforts to push back the new vice squad.

Case 3. Fighting the vice squad

'When the handcuffs clicked on my wrists on October 10, 2008, an energy was released within me that connected me directly to the spirit of the Stonewall rebellion in late June of 1969', declared Robert Pinter, a victim of a false prostitution arrest. In the weeks and months afterward, members of ACT UP, the RHA, and the Queer Justice League, joined in a coalition to fight the ongoing ravages of the New York vice squad. Yet, the arrests continued. Throughout 2008 the NYPD vice squad entrapped at least 30 men for prostitution after exiting Manhattan adult video stores with undercover officers who initially approached them for consensual sex. The city then used these false arrests as the main evidence in pursuing nuisance abatement suits against the stores to close them down. The arrests were part of a quality of life campaign, lasting nearly two decades, sanitizing signs of public sexual culture from the city streets (Crimp, 2002; Shepard, 2009). In response, Robert Pinter founded the Campaign to Stop the False Arrests in December of 2008. The group held rallies from February through June of 2009 and his case drew the notice of local and national media (Humm, 2009; Osborne, 2009). The group highlighted a crackdown on cruisers, loitering, and visible signs of public sexual culture.

Andy Velez, a long time member of the ACT UP, helped organize a few of the rallies around the false arrests. 'One thing one has to give up with such activism is a sense of good taste', Velez noted, describing an ethos which runs through queer activism. Of course, this requires letting go of shame, learning to speak up, and to cope with embarrassment. Yet, he suggests it is worth it. As an example, Velez described a brainstorming session during the meetings over the false arrests. 'It's both scary and fun planning these things. You never know when you would come up with something', ruminated Velez. 'Like just recently. . . I was at a meeting and they were talking about an upcoming rally and whether they should get a permit for a rally in Sheridan Square' – before answering himself with a 'No' one should not get a permit, just as RHA did not in their Parades without a Permit, which he attended. The action in question was scheduled in three weeks. 'And I'm like, "What are you waiting for? Too-much-time. . . You know what? Valentines is coming up. I think we need to give the Mayor a Valentine. We should go to his house on 79th Street".'

So the following week, a relatively modest number of people, including myself, attended the rally in the freezing cold. 'But it happened to be a day in which the media was hungry for something', Velez continued. There were as many journalists as activists. 'We got huge coverage and a meeting the following week with Christ Quinn and. . . the Mayor's office. It was mostly damage control'. While the NYPD has been harassing queers for cruising and cracking down on visible signs of public sexual culture for years, suddenly they were apologizing. 'We embarrassed the Mayor who wants to be god and be re-elected', Velez explained. 'The sign I made said, 'DUMP the MAYOR'. So, it's his nightmare coming to life.

That's not stuff he wants to hear, even from crazies. That's why that meeting came about. And [NY Police Commissioner] Kelly has backed off.' The charges were dropped against Pinter.

The actions gained vitality as the Coalition to Fight the False Arrests expanded to include a number of groups, including SWOP-NYC (Sex Workers Outreach Project – NYC) and SWANK (Sex Workers Action New York), as well as activists from around the city. Here, the actions built on historic theoretically-informed critiques used to build solidarity among sexual outsiders. The work of SWANK within this coalition continues a long tradition of anarchist queer sexual civil liberties activism (Kissack, 2008; Sears, 1977). Here, current activists build on Emma Goldman's (1969) anarchist theory of prostitution and sexual freedom, which frames sex work in terms of worker rights and autonomy, as well as sexual-civil-liberties. Such activism links campaigns against the vice squad within a framework for challenging unequal and repressive relations between the sexes, races, and classes, as well as rejecting oppressive social norms. Finally, it builds on an anarchist queer tradition of rejecting 'all forms of exploitation' (O'Kelly, 1993b).

In conclusion

This essay has explored the interplay of ideas and approaches to theoretically informed direct action. In the first case example, the Church Ladies highlighted the interplay between a culture of resistance, creative direct action, and the insurrectionary possibilities of humor; the second, RHA's Parades without a Permit highlighted the link between queer traditions of defiant and playful street performance and efforts to elude social controls; and the third explored the politics of rejecting prohibitive politics in favor of engagement with new forms of sexual self democracy. These are small cases. And certainly further research on this topic is needed. What the examples suggest is that queer activism and anarchism are mutually reinforcing, with issues and ideas overlapping and interconnecting. Queers benefit from the anarchist connection with global movements; conversely, anarchism gains strength by borrowing from queer approaches to direct action, community organization, rejection of patriarchy, and the pragmatic organizing strategies Jay Blotcher, Brian Griffin, and Andy Velez describe. The discipline of queer activism, buttressed with research, flexibility, and pragmatism helps support movement action in any number of ways. While not all anarchists agree with such approaches, anarchism and queer organizing often meet on the ground within a flexible approach to actually creating and sustaining alternative public commons. Both share a propensity toward taking power via direct action. This approach injects a vitality into multiple movements. Yet, for queer theory to value this interplay of ideas and practices, it could benefit by stepping off the sidewalk and back into the streets. The challenge for queer and anarchist politics is to support mutually an ongoing commitment to a rejection of a prohibitive politics in favor of the political possibilities of pleasure ebbing through multiple movements for social change.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks for Jamie Heckert and Kelly Moore for their ideas and suggestions for this article, and to Spencer Sunshine for his the multiple conversations, which helped inspire this work and for helping me establish contact with J.P. Hargignies.

References

- Altman D (1972) *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation*. Sidney: Angus and Robertson.
- Amster R, DeLeon A, Fernandez L, Nocella II, AJ and Shannon D (2009) Introduction. In: Amster R, DeLeon A, Fernandez L, Nocella II, AJ, Shannon D (eds) *Contemporary Anarchist Studies*. New York: Routledge, 1–8.
- Anarcho (2001) Anarchism and freedom. URL (accessed 28 July 2009): <http://www.struggle.ws/anarchism/writers/anarcho/talks/anarANDfreedom.html>.
- Bader EJ (2005) Ambulatory's many obstacles. *Brooklyn Rail*, May. URL (accessed April 2010): <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2005/05/local/ambulatory-many-obstacles>.
- Berry D (2004) "Workers of the world, embrace!" Daniel Guérin, the labour movement and homosexuality. *Left History* 9(2): 11–43.
- Blotcher J (1999) Anarchy, Inc. On its 30th anniversary, activists reflect on the short-lived revolution that was gay liberation front. *New York Blade News*, 4 June: 1, 6, 7.
- Brown G (2007) Mutinous eruptions: Autonomous spaces of radical queer activism. *Environment and Planning A* 39(11): 2685–2698.
- Butters S (1983) The logic of inquiry of participant observation. In: Hall S, Jefferson T (eds) *Resistance through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. London: Hutchinson University Library, 253–273.
- Church Ladies (2005) *Church Ladies Song Book*. URL (accessed 1 December 2005): <http://www.churchladies.org/>
- Crimp D (2002) *Melancholia and Moralism*. Boston, MA: MIT Press.
- Duggan L (2004) *The Twilight of Equality*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Escoffier J (n.d.) Herbert Marcuse. *Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Culture*, URL (accessed 30 July 2009): http://www.glbtc.com/social-sciences/marcuse_h.html.
- Fifth Estate (2008) Party Like Its 1929, (unsigned editorial). *Fifth Estate* 43(3): 3.
- Freeman J (1972) *Tyranny of Structurelessness*. pamphlet by The Anarchist Workers Association, URL (accessed 1 June 2009): <http://www.christiebooks.com/PDFs/The%20Tyranny%20of%20Structurelessness.pdf>.
- Gamson J (2005) *The Fabulous Sylvester*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Goldman E (1916) Birth control. *The Emma Goldman Papers*, URL (accessed 29 January 2008): edu/Goldman/Curricula/WomensRights/letter.html.
- Goldman E (1969) *Anarchism and Other Essays*. New York: Dover.
- Goldman E (2001 [1923]) Letter to Dr. Hirschfeld. In: Bull C (ed.) *Come Out Fighting*. New York: Nation Books, 3–6.
- Goldstein R (2002) *The Attack Queers*. New York: Verso.
- Graeber D (2004a) The new anarchists. In: Mertes T (ed.) *Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?* New York: Verso, 202–215.
- Graeber D (2004b) *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago, IL: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Guerin D (1970) *Anarchism*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Hargignies JP (2009) 1969 Episode. Correspondence with the author, 22 May.
- Hall D (2003) *Queer Theories*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Halperin DM (1995) *Saint-Foucault*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Heckert J (2006) The anarchy of queer: Rethinking poststructuralist possibilities and the politics of sexuality, paper presented at the Political Studies Association annual conference, reading. URL (accessed 1 January 2007): http://www.anarchist-studies-network.org.uk/documents/The_Anarchy_of_Queer.pdf.
- Hegeman R (2009) Kan. Abortion Doc killed in church; Suspect Held, 31 May. URL (accessed 31 May 2009): http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5gn0Annr0h-9FIDc_3RXgyXWP40nQD98HG2P00.
- Highlyman L (1995 [1988]) An introduction to anarchism, URL (accessed 24 May 2009): <http://www.black-rose.com/articles-liz/intro-@.html>.
- Holt J (2008) *Stop Me if You've Heard This One Before*. New York: WW Norton.
- Holtzman B, Hughes C and Van Meter K (2004) Do it yourself... and the movement beyond capitalism. *Radical Society* 31(1): 7–20.
- Humm A (2009) Police charged with false arrests of gay men at adult video stores. *The Gotham Gazette*, 2 February. URL (accessed 28 February 2009): <http://www.gothamgazette.com/article/civilrights/20090202/3/2813>.
- Jay M (1973) *The Dialectical Imagination*. New York: Little Brown.
- Juris J (2007) Practicing militant ethnography. In: Shukaitis S, Graeber D (eds) *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations/Collective Theorization in the Global Justice Movement*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 164–178.
- Kirsch MH (2000) *Queer Theory and Social Change*. New York: Routledge.
- Kissack T (2008) *Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895–1917*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- McLemee S (2009) Fifty years after stonewall. *Inside Higher Ed*, 25 June. URL (accessed 26 June 2009): <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee247>.
- Notes From Nowhere (eds) (2003) *We Are Everywhere*. London and New York: Verso.
- Nova J (2009) Correspondence with the author, 31 May.
- Nyong'o T (2008) Do you want queer theory (or do you want the truth)? Intersections of punk and queer in the '70s. *Radical History Review* 100(winter): 103–120.
- O'Kelly K (1993a) Review: Everything you ever wanted to know about anarchism. *Solidarity* 38. URL (accessed 1 January 2002): <http://surf.to/anarchism>.
- O'Kelly K (1993b) New law aids pimps and protection rackets. *Workers Solidarity* 40. URL (accessed 1 January 2002): <http://surf.to/anarchism>.
- Osborne D (2009) Bloomberg's home targeted in false arrests protest. *Gay City News* 14 February: 1.
- RHA (2008) Presentation at New York Anarchist Bookfair. New York: Judson Church.
- Ritchie N (2008) Principles of engagement: The anarchist influence on queer youth cultures. In: Driver S (ed.) *Queer Youth Cultures*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 261–278.
- Rogue J and Shannon D (2008) Call for papers: "Queering Anarchism". URL (accessed 18 August 2009): http://www.goodreads.com/story/show/22002.Queering_Anarchism.
- Rubin G (1975) The traffic of women: Notes on the political economy of sex. In: Reiter R (ed.) *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 157–210.
- Sears HD (1977) *The Sex Radicals*. Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas.
- Sedgwick E (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Shepard B (2009) *Queer Political Performance and Protest: Play, Pleasure, and Social Movement*. New York: Routledge.

- SFLA (2007) Students for life – how to organize a vigil at an abortion clinic. URL (accessed 26 May 2009): <http://www.studentsforlife.org/index.php/resources/organize-an-event/organizeavigilatanabortionclinic/>
- Sycamore B (2008 [2004]) Gay shame. In: Sycamore B (ed.) *Thats Revolting*. Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 268–295.
- Smith D (1998) “Queer Theory” is entering the mainstream. *New York Times* 17, January: B9.
- Teal D (1995 [1971]) *The Gay Militants*. New York: St Martins Press.
- Tent P (2004) *Midnight at the Palace*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books.
- Warner M (1993) Introduction. In: Warner M (ed.) *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, vii–xxxii.
- Warner M (1999) *The Trouble with Normal*. New York: Free Press.
- WeWantYou (2009) Message to rha@lists.riseup.net Parade w/out a permit recap.6/22.
- Woodside S (2001) Every Joke is a Tiny Revolution, self published paper.

Benjamin Shepard, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Human Services at New York College of Technology/City University of New York He is the author/editor of six books including *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997), *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002) and *Queer Political Performance and Protest and Play: Creativity, and the New Community Organizing* (Routledge, 2009). His forthcoming works include *Community Projects as Social Activism* (SAGE), and *The Beach beneath the Streets: Exclusion, Control, and Play in Public Space*, with Greg Smithsimon (SUNY). Address: New York College of Technology/City University of New York, 300 Jay Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201.