

Outing Begins At Home

The recent storm over 'outing' has revealed deep confusion in the lesbian and gay community's political strategy.

Chris Granlund examines the meaning of 'coming out' in the 90s

Faggots Rooting Out Closeted Sexuality (Frocs) inspired more column inches of print dedicated to lesbian and gay politics in the space of a week than we can normally read in a year. That was an achievement in itself. After all the chaos and fury, however, one simple fact stands out from the rest. Not, as Frocs-supporter Derek Jarman suggested, that the lesbian and gay movement 'has come of age', but that it is time that the 'movement' had a serious think about its own identity, aims and preferences.

The modern lesbian and gay movement grew up with a commitment to converting fear and shame to anger and pride. It grew out of self-motivated acts of defiance and solidarity and the key element in its strategy was a determination to 'come out' to a largely hostile world. The simple logic was that if all lesbians and gay men were to 'come out', then homosexuals would be seen to be everywhere and eventually be taken for granted. Inevitably, in that process, society itself would be changed, no longer being choked up with attempts to ignore, deny and suppress a large part of itself.

The annual Gay Pride marches which take place throughout the world are vivid representations of this strategy. The marching, dressing up and singing are public celebrations of sexual diversity. They resemble carnivals more than traditional political demonstrations and protests. Maybe this is because they aren't about protest at all, being more concerned with the public celebration of pleasures that most societies would prefer to push behind closed doors, or even into oblivion.

In some ways, 'outing' seems to be a tactical extension of the strategy of lesbian and gay visibility. But under closer scrutiny it is revealed to be a deviation from that strategy which is riddled with moral, ethical and political dilemmas. The outer's logic is that, while it would be preferable if all lesbians and gay men were to choose to 'come out', in the meantime, forcing a number of rich and famous alleged homosexuals 'out of the closet' by publishing lists of names or pasting their pictures around town might advance the process. This logic works on the principle that the 'outing' of one Jodie Foster or a Jason Donovan is equivalent in political terms to the 'coming out' of thousands of common or garden queers. Setting this hard currency of imposed celebrity outings over the self-assurance and pride of lesbians and gays in the street is a dubious rate of exchange. It fetishises the power of superstars and establishment figures to influence public opinion and overlooks the damage such actions do to the atmosphere in which people struggle with the implications of 'coming out' to parents, friends and colleagues. Muddying the boundaries between the bigoted sensationalism of the tabloids, the taunts of the school bully and the tactics

of the gay activist has doubtful value for a movement committed to sexual liberation and diversity.

The 'outing' campaign and the confused responses it elicited can be traced back to muddled interpretations of the term 'coming out' which made the concept of a lesbian and gay community imaginable. It is a phrase that most of us would use to describe our private and public acknowledgement and celebration of our homosexuality. It's a shorthand for a complex series of personal decisions which people experience in different ways. But like any form of shorthand, it can't tell the whole story. There's nothing wrong with that on a day to day basis; it only becomes a problem if the rest of the story gets lost or distorted and the shorthand comes to *be* rather than simply to represent the whole. My dissatisfaction with the term is rooted in the fact that it contributes to a fundamental confusion about sexuality which threatens to undermine the ambitions of a politics committed to sexual diversity.

The dominant popular meaning of 'coming out' is made clear in the extended form of 'coming out of the closet'. This describes a moment, a step from repression to expression, secrecy to openness, darkness to light. It's a vivid metaphor, but one which reduces a complex process to two moments, then and now, punctuated by a dramatic step over a threshold. The 'closet' metaphor is a common shorthand, but when it is abstracted from the larger experience that it has been taken to represent, at best it loses its value and at worst it becomes a misleading distortion.

The essentialist view of sexuality tends to emphasise 'coming out' as a moment of realisation of something that has always been there. An 'admission', first to yourself and then to the people around you, that you are gay. The focus is on the decision to publicly acknowledge your 'true' homosexual nature. This scenario does not leave room for periods of uncertainty, ambiguity or further change. Every lesbian and gay man knows that 'coming out' is not simply a single decision which was made and acted upon in one moment in the past. It might be possible to pinpoint a decisive moment of self-awareness but this is only a point in a process that continues with each new opportunity to speak up or remain silent about, to ignore or to explore our homosexuality.

'Outing' is an illustration of the problems inherent in the casual use and limited interpretation of the term 'coming out'. It tends to reinforce the popular misconception that the world is divided up into those who are out, those who are straight and those who are 'in the closet'. It seems that we have even come to believe it ourselves, and that undermines our ability to imagine alliances and strategies beyond an essentialist 'either-or' world.

When it is described as a process

rather than a single and final decision, many heterosexuals will acknowledge that they are also familiar with the challenge of 'coming out'. At some time they have found themselves emotionally involved with or physically attracted to someone of the same sex while continuing to perceive their primary sexual orientation to be heterosexual. Among my gay and lesbian friends there is often a tendency to condemn these people for refusing to let go of the 'privileges of heterosexuality'. The fact that one of the 'privileges' of compromised heterosexuality is fear and alienation is more often overlooked.

Common suspicions in the gay community about the 'fence-sitting' of bisexuals are another feature of a fortress mentality which sees 'coming out' as an endgame to be understood in purely political terms and ignores the complexities involved in interpersonal relationships and unruly desire. In my first contacts with the lesbian and gay community I sometimes felt reluctant to 'come out' to people about my heterosexual past. At times it seemed that I had exchanged one discrete category and its taboos for another.

The desire to start 'claiming our own', as one activist described 'outing', is informed by this all too familiar and conservative desire within the lesbian and gay community to cling to the safety of fixed categories. This narrows the base of that community and obstructs the inclusion of those who are committed to sexual diversity but are currently happily heterosexual. We might be better served by devoting our political energies to the construction of alliances with all those who support sexual diversity regardless of their current orientation, rather than to resort to 'outing', which reinforces the mistaken idea that you are either 'in' or 'out' or 'straight'.

A less rigid view of sexual identity is able to interpret 'coming out' as a more open-ended and inclusive process, the goal of which is not the fixed destination of another sexual category but a commitment to diversity. 'Coming out' could be defined as an acceptance of the fluidity of sexuality and desire, a fluidity that acknowledges the existence of moments of coherence that may extend across days, weeks, months, even lifetimes. This interpretation of 'coming out' represents a movement beyond the idea of sexuality as an essential and unchanging aspect of our identity with heterosexuality and homosexuality as fixed, natural and mutually exclusive categories.

The lessons of the open-ended, personal process involved in a non-essentialist view of 'coming out' could be used to construct a political strategy that is adequate to the challenge of sexual diversity and process. Such a politics would refuse the security of essential categories, while recognising the importance of organising around contin-

gent categories such as 'lesbian', 'gay', 'bisexual' and 'straight' to help us engage with prevailing ideas about what is 'natural'. This would be no club for the 'sexually-pure homosexual' but a meeting place for all those with an interest in creating a society which embraces sexual diversity. Judges, MPs, members of the royal family and other soap operas would, of course, be welcome. We would open our arms to anyone who didn't mind being (mis)taken for a homosexual.

Such a politics would be equipped to appreciate the complexity of personal and collective decisions about how and when to 'come out' and to whom. 'Outing' other people should be the last tactic we need to employ. If we are impatient with the rate of progress achieved by annual Pride Marches, then we should set ourselves new targets. The 'Kiss-ins' and 'Queer Weddings' of

to kiss our friends and lovers in the street will achieve more than taunting a shy 22 year-old Australian singer who thinks he must be straight because he likes surfing. Holding hands with each other as we stand in the queue to see *The Silence Of The Lambs* will have more impact than initiating Chinese whispers about what Jodie Foster does in bed.

These simple low-key gestures of affection do involve a risk to our personal safety. It's up to each of us to choose our moment and the most appropriate places to make our stand. The neighbours might talk. Jokes will be made, people will double-take. Some of our jobs might be jeopardised. It would be foolish to forget that people are assaulted and sometimes even murdered simply because they are known to be lesbian or gay. These are the devices available to keep us invisible and in order. Labelling other people as 'Absolutely Queer' against their will, or pretending to draw



Claiming our own: The better kind of outing

recent years represent positive new ways of drawing attention to ourselves, having fun and getting through to the media. Such symbolic affirmations of diverse desires and relationships - from same-sex marriage to one-night-stands to threesomes and beyond - could lead us to step up the personal stands that we make on a day-to-day basis for the right to be open about our sexual identity.

We might target certain spaces to be quietly claimed for acceptance. Cinemas, theatres and concerts might be good places for us to begin to insist upon our right to be able to relax with our friends and lovers outside the context of an organised demonstration. For while many have been quick to support the outers' victimisation of prominent individuals, few are prepared to display their own homosexual affections in public. We don't need to press-gang celebrities into being seen for us. Our self-motivated presence in the flesh has more impact than any number of seedy revelations in print. Assuming the right

up lists of potential victims, contributes to the climate in which such attacks are tolerated and justified.

The practices associated with 'outing' fuel the implication that to be gay is to be somehow guilty and degraded. Worst of all, it is a betrayal of the institution of 'coming out' that we have created for ourselves. This institution is a process which we need to nurture and renew from time to time. Its strength is based on the fact that we choose to enter it with a full awareness of its pleasures and dangers, its liberations and constraints. There are risks involved. But all those who join us, whatever their pleasure, will have calculated those risks and had the opportunity to weigh them against the potential gains. Taking personal responsibility for such risks and deciding for ourselves how far we are prepared to go individually and collectively, with pride, is what 'coming out' is all about.

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