

SPECTRUM

THE GAY FORUM

Analysing the system of Gay oppression

by Terry Richard

Straights can learn a lot from us gay people. We teach straight people so many things about sexuality. Like, perhaps, not to take it quite so seriously ... not to kill each other over it.
Armistead Maupin

The ways in which homosexuals are treated and the pain we suffer are part of a fabric of oppression in our whole society. Despite the creation of gay community centers which are found in larger cities across Canada and the U.S., educational programs, and civil rights laws, ignorance and the hatred of gay people and attacks on us will continue until the institutions that benefit from this oppression are completely removed.

Just as the oppression of Blacks is the result of a racist society the oppression of gays is the result of a heterosexist society. Whether we as homosexuals like it or not we live in a society which is heterosexually dominated where we account for a tenth of the population. However, just because one in ten people are gay doesn't mean our rights and our lives should be ignored. The term "gay oppression" is often used to refer only to the fact that some people are looked down upon and discriminated against because of our sexual preference. The term "heterosexism", on the other hand, refers to the cause of the oppression - the socialization of all people to fear their own and each other's homosexuality, and the reinforcement of traditional dominant male/passive female social/sexual relationships.

Heterosexism makes an institution out of heterosexuality and enforces it through ideology and social structure. It shapes all of society and harms all human relationships by so narrowly and rigidly restricting the range of our experience and expression of affection.

I know of many heterosexuals who are upset by the term "heterosexism" because they feel it blames all of gay oppression on what they do in bed. On the contrary, heterosexism pervades all of society, not just peoples bedrooms. Although like sexism and racism, the system was not created by heterosexuals liking today, most of today's heterosexuals do identify with it, perpetuate it, and cause gay people pain by their prejudice against and ignorance/denial of homosexuality. For example,

heterosexual couples may take for granted being able to kiss goodbye at train stations or being able to dance together at weddings or parties without realizing that these common expressions of affection are privileges in this society because they are denied to same sex lovers. A university student may show a picture of his girlfriend to a professor of his, but if I were to show that same professor a picture of my lover, I can well imagine the reaction.

All men and women working for change must learn to separate their heterosexual practice and their identities from the oppressive ideology of heterosexism, which must be opposed. To do so, they need to question their own orientation and the assumptions about relationships that go with it. It is only persistent conditioning

that keeps many people from exploring the homosexual side of themselves, and unless heterosexuals work themselves free of such conditioning, they can't help but collude with the oppression of gays and gayness. Thus we continue to use the term "heterosexism" to describe the system which oppresses gays. However, change can only lead to better things. This is, you know, the gay nineties.

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