



MAX FOX ON CHITTY'S “SEXUAL HEGEMONY”

The Final Straw Radio

A chat with Max Fox, editor of the late Christopher Chitty's book, "Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy and Capital in the Rise of the World System." They spoke on the failures of Gay Liberation, connections between sexual identity, class and the state and how sexuality ties into current liberation movements.

Aired on May 1, 2021

This week, you'll hear Scott's chat with Max Fox, editor of the late Christopher Chitty's book, "*Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy and Capital in the Rise of the World System*", published by Duke University Press in 2020. Max Fox is an editor of Pinko Magazine, a former editor of New Inquiry Magazine and translator of Guy Hocquenghem's novel "*The Amphitheatre of the Dead*". You can find Max on twitter at [@mxwfx](https://twitter.com/mxwfx). Christopher Chitty was a phd candidate in the History of Consciousness at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

For the hour they spoke on the failures of Gay Liberation, connections between sexual identity, class and the state and how sexuality ties into current liberation movements. Some of the thinkers mentioned during the chat include Silvia Federici, Karl Marx, Guy Hocquenghem, Michel Foucault, Samuel R. Delaney and Giovanni Arrighi.

Fox also notes that workers at the publisher, Duke University Press, are currently struggling to unionize. You can find out more about that struggle at DUPWorkersUnion.org.

Search for this interview title at <https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

Scott: We're talking today about sort of the current state of radical anti-authoritarian, queer liberatory movements, and the legacy of gay liberation, you know, from the 60s and 70s, and like, gay history. Before we get into it, can you introduce yourself and the kind of work you've done? We're talking about, specifically, Christopher Chitty's book and your placement within that, and if you want to say anything else about yourself, and your pronouns, whatever you feel.

Max Fox: Sure, my name is Max Fox, I use he/him. I am the editor of this book that was written by Christopher Chitty. It's called *Sexual Hegemony: Statecraft, Sodomy, and Capital in the Rise of the World System*. I'm also an editor at gay communist magazine called Pinko and the translator of short book by a French theorist Guy Hocquenghem called *Amphitheater of the Dead*.

S: Which is sort of that's how we met sharing an interest in Hocquenghem. Do you want to talk at all about how you got involved in editing Christopher Chitty's book and the project, and how your work relates to it?

MF: I knew Chris when I was in college at UC Santa Cruz, he was a graduate student in the history of consciousness department, which is this kind of fairly unique, critical theory, Marxist philosophy, etc, etc style graduate program that I, as a young, enthusiastic leftist was like, "wow, simply the coolest thing you could possibly be studying." I tried to sit in on all these classes in that department, which is sort of one of the ways that I encountered him.

But we met really organizing on this anti-austerity, anti-tuition hike, movement, in, let's say 2009-2010. Right after the crash, that became the sort of Occupy California, Occupy DC system movement, which was sort of a precursor to the Occupy Wall Street stuff. And so he was someone who I met in this moment of intense personal transformation, I suppose. He was also working on this very incredible sounding theory, that promised to, in my view, kind of revolutionize the understanding of the history of sexuality, sexuality studies, queer theory, etc. And I was very eager to have something like that, because I felt kind of dissatisfied with a lot of the sexual politics that were ready to hand at the time, it was the "gay marriage" moment. I felt kind of unconvinced by a lot of the positions on both

sides, and I wanted something more Marxist or rigorous or something like that. Chris was working on precisely that. So I was very eager for him to finish his dissertation and sort of get that out in the world.

So when he died in 2015 I was personally very devastated. I attached that feeling to this thought that, like, the work wouldn't be finished. And that was something that I could actually sort of put some efforts towards. I didn't really think it was going to be such a long project, but I sort of assumed the responsibility of collecting the draft material that his family and his friends had access to, and finding a publisher and getting it through the revision process and things like that, and now kind of seeing it through the publicity end or whatever.

I had an intense intellectual response to this. I wouldn't have done it, I don't think, if I didn't think it was worth thinking about or thinking with, but obviously, there's a pretty significant emotional component as well for me.

S: Yeah, thanks for sharing that history that you have, like connected with Chris Chitty. And I think you were right, back then, to say that the work is going to make a giant contribution. I've felt reading this, that it has really affected my way of thinking and also responded to some of my own frustrations. But also I want to acknowledge that kind of personal grief work there, that must have been part of your editing, but you brought this thing out, which I think is super important. If you're ready to move into some of these ideas, then tease them out a little bit.

So, in your foreword to the book, you summarize the project, as, I'm quoting you, "an attempt to think through the failure of sexual liberation, by what Chitty described as returning the history of sexuality to a history of property." And like we could talk about that as kind of combining his readings of Marx and Foucault as you do, and that's a whole debate within queer theory. But I was wondering if you could explain this argument the way that you sum it up, how would you articulate the relationship that he explores in the book between same sex practices, particularly sodomy, sex between men, and the development of the bourgeois state? And how is the figure of the homosexual or homosexuality helped consolidate the state?

MF: One of the tricky things about this book, I think, is that it's making two slightly different claims that are obviously related, but the relation between them is maybe a little underspecified. He is saying that there's a way of grasping power that falls into the name of sexual hegemony, which is basically how a ruling class comes to install its particular sexual practices and norms in the intimate self-conception of numbers of classes that don't occupy the same position in society. That's sexual hegemony. And then secondly, he's saying that the figure of male homosexuality illuminates the particular history of how in capitalist society, sexual hegemony is an integral part of bourgeois rule or rule of capital sexual relations.

He's telling a story about how, in the earliest sort of capitalist societies and the earliest spaces in the world that you could plausibly claim are governed by capitalist relation to production -- which he, following this economic historian Giovanni Arrighi, locates in northern Italian city states in 1400 or so, Venice in particular. First of all, in the Mediterranean basin, there is, in this moment, there's a widespread and unremarkable fact of men having sex with men. It doesn't have its own name, necessarily, it doesn't give you a sort of unique social status, because it's so ordinary. Relations of production, apprenticeships, and seclusion of women in the household, and even things like the type of ships that they use, all of this basically contributes to a public sphere that is exclusively male, essentially, where men and women don't have any access to each other, except for within their own family. So sex between these people is kind of prohibited by the incest ban. The only kind of sexuality you're going to have, if you're a man, is with other men who you'll encounter on the docks, in the marketplaces, in your workplace, in the cruising areas and in the taverns and whatever. And that's simply what you do. It doesn't give you an identity.

He's saying that around the same time that capitalist relation to production began to take hold. There's also a new form of Republican governance, where the laws of the city have some shared source of legitimacy. It's not just a kind of feudal lord or whatever, but there's some attempt at reviving a kind of like civic base of power. That comes in conflict with the actual disparate levels of power that people have. There are more powerful rich people and less powerful working people. And so you need a way of managing this conflict that doesn't end up expressing itself in overthrowing this new form of government and installing rule of the many who are poor, instead of the few who want to have the legitimacy of consent. Any-

way, sorry, that's, that's a bit of an aside. The point is that these governments start adopting a new way of enforcing or regulating sodomy, which as I said before, wasn't really a serious problem. But there are problems obviously when you have disputes between lovers or disputes between clients and patrons. And so instead of punishing sodomites with capital punishment -- which was maybe a scary threat in the past, but wasn't ever actually applied very often -- what these governments do is they start a special police force that is just there to investigate accusations and issue fines, basically.

And so what this does is it incentivizes people to inform on each other. If you're mad that your ex is going out with your rival, then you can call the police about it and say, these two sodomites, I saw them in the loggia the other night, and you should go fine them 24 florins or whatever. Or you're a sex worker, and your john doesn't pay you and you threaten to turn him in. It establishes a new way that power operates in these relations that were more directly mediated by personal sort of encounters with each other. So that's a way that the emerging bourgeois state (or capitalist relations of production that need a form of government to take hold) changes and kind of takes a new form. These ways of regulating sodomy are ways of taking sexuality into itself and turning it into a new instance where the state is a presence in people's lives where it wasn't before. I don't know if that was actually a direct enough answer at all. Do you think that was good for your question?

S: Yeah. That really breaks it down in a helpful way for me. The first historical chapter starts there when you're talking about. The way you explain it shows it's like the first capture of whatever becomes homosexuality, because you talked about how it routes the relationship through this state. You can have recourse to this concentrated form of power in that police force that will fine people. And so people then give up whatever relationship they have between each other to go to this other place to deal with their problems. And I think that, yeah, the way you explained it was really helpful.

And then the other aspect of it that I think is important, in what you're saying, is that it becomes a way of trying to mitigate potential threat, right, from the many, or the lower classes. There's this framework of like, consent to be ruled, by getting your recompense, or whatever it

could be if you're jealous, or something's taken from you, or you've been forced into a situation you don't want. But then that also diffuses the possibility of rebellion in some way. I guess that's the definition of sexual hegemony and how that work for state power. There's like this way that he traces the increased politicization of homosexuality to that history of producing the proletariat. So you were talking about the emerging forms of capitalist production, that goes from cutting people out of subsistence ways of living, bringing them into wage work, creating these urban centers, where people are living different lives and working different ways. And he often calls that a kind of surplus population, or superfluous.

The thing that's really interesting is that there's these cultures of public practices of homosexuality, where the men are working together. The thing that really strikes me is how Chitty's argument replays some of the old coordinates of talking about homosexuality, that can either be a kind of pro-gay way of thinking, or a really homophobic way of thinking. It usually centers around the kind of that superfluousness or uselessness or the non-reproductive aspects of sex as a form of decadence and disruption of a moral form. And I was just wondering, are we so inundated with this framework that we can't think about sex between men outside of that moral framework? Is it always going to be ambivalent? Like there was a way that communist parties would say homosexuality was a bourgeois decadence, and it's true to a certain extent, right, like Chitty's showing us that it's tied to that, but...do you want to jump in?

MF: So I mean, there's a lot there. So there's another thing that he's trying to do in this argument, which is to say that this repression that we have come to identify with the meaning of sexuality, of homosexuality or queer sexualities, whatever, "deviant sexualities" that's not a necessary feature, either of sexuality as such, of sexuality under capitalism. Because, you know, he's a good reader of Foucault, the idea that power is productive as well as oppressive. You don't want to have a concept that can only say, "sexuality is what the state takes from you," or something like that.

He aligns this history of Arighian hegemonic centers of the world system, as capitalism kind of expands over the globe. So it goes first from Florence and Venice in northern Italy, and that goes to Amsterdam, is the next

center, then London and then New York. This is the sort of world systems theory, according to Arighi narrative of capitalist expansion. And Chitty says, “Okay, let’s find out what happens in the moment of transition from one center to the next, when the declining center is experiencing crisis or loss of its previous capacity to exert hegemony.” So he’s saying in these moments of decline, you can find increased depression and that’s actually what the repression means. It’s not that capitalism has this inherently sex negative aspect, it’s that as a sort of cyclical crisis ridden system, it’s going to have these moments of dissolution that will have semi predictable effects. And one of the predictable effects that he asserts is discoverable in the record is that there’s this increased attention to male sodomy, or men having sex with other men, in these moments of crisis and dissolution of the hegemonic center.

So on the one hand, that’s one explanation for this kind of like moral valence, right? Capitalism only notices that sex between men is even happening in this moment when it itself is going through crisis. So of course it’s going to attach a kind of pejorative meaning to it, right? Because it’s looking for reasons for its decline. And I think that’s, you know, relatively convincing. I have to say I haven’t done this historical research myself, so perhaps another set of archival material would be able to make a counter argument that says, “no this is actually constant, or actually it has nothing to do with the temporality of financial crisis” or blah, blah, blah? I don’t really know, I mean, this seems compelling to me. But I don’t think it’s actually necessary for his argument to be true.

I think that the point that he’s making...capitalism is characterized by a kind of ceaseless drive to expand, and consume evermore arenas of human social life, right? Like that’s observably the case, that’s theoretically derivable, from, you know, Marxist analysis and from, it’s a classic tenet of most people left. And what that means generally is that people who are living in non-capitalist parts of the world, and experiencing subsistence forms of social production and reproduction, are severed from their capacity to live like this and be brought into the circuits of capitalist production. A lot of the times that has meant turning them into an industrial proletariat, putting them to work in factories, or on plantations, or sending people to die in armies or settle genocided territories. But something that that requires is that you have this kind of floating population that’s been severed from the means of reproducing their own life at the very

beginning, so the premise of capitalist production is a surplus population, right? That is not able to meet its own needs for survival without seeking employment on the market. Or in non-waged areas, in the household, internally, or in the gray market.

I think one of the useful things about Chris and his analysis is that he has a sophisticated enough reading of Marx and capitalism to dispense with what a lot of the traditional Marxist - basically moral positions - on work are, and say "it's not good, that people are productive, in fact, that's a source of domination." These questions of "is homosexuality somehow intrinsically related to non-productive modes of living?" I think he deals with it in a number of different ways. One of which is to say that the forms of direct production under capitalism produce homosexuality, you know? Like the classic form of capitalistic production is -- this wasn't always historically the case, but you know, in the fantasy -- is the sex segregated factory, right? So, a bunch of men who all spend 8, 10, 12 hours a day with another 100, or 1000, whatever, some number of other men. You know, most of them often historically live in dormitories, or in workhouse style situations, they certainly don't have enough money to start a family. So oftentimes, historically, the only kind of pleasure they're going to find is in each other. Or the other sort of like proto-typically capitalist form of productive activity is shipping where you have the same problem, right? And obviously, famously, these are hotbeds of homoerotic intrigue.

The same goes for the army. If you think about the fucking settler colonies, like on the frontier, all the men are either there alone in the wilderness, and out away from the social world that they were raised in. So it's everywhere, once you start looking at this. Prisons, obviously, famously. Once you impose a kind of sex segregated route norm on the sort of productive social apparatus -- which wasn't consistently the case throughout the history of capitalism, certainly -- but then you inevitably have the problem of proletarians are gonna have sex with each other. That's one of the sources also of this concern for regulating sexuality, regulating homosexuality is because it's a labor discipline question sometimes, too.

S: Yeah. This does a few things, right? Like in the earlier articulations of sexual liberation more generally, and gay liberation, there's that repressive idea that there are these forces that are making us not have the sex we want. Then gay liberation had the strategies of trying to find

proof of the naturalness of homosexuality throughout history. So in a way, what Chitty does is expanding on Foucault who says, “Well, no, the homosexuals invented at a certain moment, and it’s not this eternal force of like, repression and sexual license” or whatever.

But in another way, I think what I like so much about what Chitty’s doing is he’s saying that we’re not asking necessarily the right questions when we are focusing on these things. So like, like you said, homosexuality as we know, it is created by the development of capitalism. But the other thing he keeps insisting on, Chitty, is that it’s contingent, right? And that’s the other kind of deviation from like, Marx, it’s a contingent history. It’s not necessarily that it was this way. There’s the ambivalence of homosexuality, which is also a tool of rule and oppression. It’s a medium for us to find liberation and a way that we’re captured is like inherent to that process. I’ve seen this being articulated in various ways, but it’s almost an unresolvable paradox in a way. I’m interested in exploring with you how it shifts the coordinates of what we think about when we try to aim for liberation. The way that Chitty articulates that (and this is a line that you just mentioned to me before we start recording) says that “queer would then imply a contradictory process in which norms of gender and sexuality are simultaneously denatured and renaturalized.” That’s the process of sexual hegemony, using sexuality as a form of ruling. The threats are often public sex or cross class sex. So I was wondering if you want to help me unpack that, if you spent some time on that? What does he mean by these norms, the sexual hegemony being “denatured and renaturalized”? And what does the double sided process look like?

MF: Yeah, so there’s another one that I find very helpful, that I think might also illustrate this a little bit, which is that...oh I can’t remember where it is so I’m going to try and just reproduce it from memory, but it’s probably going to be slightly different: “sexuality could only become a problem for a society in which biological reproduction was decoupled from the reproduction of ownership.” Maybe that’s a little complicated, but it’s an historical argument, which is about the dissolution of the feudal world, where, let’s say, land title is passed down through the family, and on the peasant side and conversely, political rule is hereditary inheritance as well in the aristocratic sense. In that society sexuality appears as something that’s kind of natural, right? It can’t really be an object of anxiety or

control in the same way. And historically, it wasn't.

What Foucault talks about, it's like, the pastoral power versus the medical discourse or whatever. Priests could tell you to confess, but there's really not a lot of power to investigate whether or not sex was taking place, according to the way that you wanted it to be, or to punish people for it. Because it's very hard to provide evidence that a sexual act took place, in the absence of being there, compelling eyewitness testimony. Peasant marriage in feudal times was actually quite limited. It just wasn't a floating social problem that needed regulation the same way that it did, once, he's saying, ownership -- private property relations -- become transferable, alienable. Which is the hallmark of capitalist relations of production.

In that sense, sexual norms have become denatured, they once appeared to be organic, natural expressions of the sort of unitary creative world. Now they appear to be an object of political contention and control. They're renaturalized in this new way, by the reimposition of what appears to be necessity of socially objective meaning that's enforced by a state repressive apparatus, but as well as private mechanisms of coercion and control in the workplace and family. In the past you may have been able to, like, fuck your friends in the field, but now there's a different type of threat from the police. And so you become a different, a new kind of person. Your nature changes, right, and you're suddenly apprehended by the state in a way. It's this kind of decomposition of a previously automatic organic expression of the social order, where sex is a kind of meaningless in that it doesn't make a difference whether or not ownership gets transferred in the normal way, to something that might disrupt it. It might disrupt it because there's a new type of person in the world, and that is the subject of the hegemonic sexual norm, and the deviant person who fails to be protected by this norm. Does that help?

S: Yeah, totally. It's interesting because, where we are today, we get stuck on identity. And it's like, the problem that you talked about, like sexuality becoming a problem for statecraft and state rule, is internalized for us as a problem, like, "who am I?" And like, "how do I figure that out?" But if we trace back those identity terms, they're like police orders, they were forms of controlling criminalization. He also talks a lot about how this is a history of policing? So the policing of homosexuals goes hand in hand with the policing of sex work and vagrancy.

MF: Sure, yeah.

S: And so the other thing that I think this is parallel to, and maybe there's something to articulate here, is like, within the Marxist theory there's -- this is another form of maybe primitive accumulation, in the way that Sylvia Federici talks about in *Caliban and The Witch* in terms of how the gendering of women forms a kind of enclosure around their bodies and sexuality -- like this is another enclosure, which is like an identity type rather than whatever those organic forms are. That could have existed before. And if you'd think about those previous communities and like, maybe even pre feudal, right, like, it just wasn't a problem. Or there were other norms in which it was like, acted out, but like, it's not like, "yeah this guy sleeps with other men sometimes" wasn't like a problem. There's just like, "oh yeah, that's a thing that someone does".

MF: Yeah. Or it's just like, yeah, that's what men do they love to have sex with beautiful people, whatever, as long as they're the active partner, or whatever. Like, it doesn't have bearing necessarily on the social standing of the person doing it.

S: Well, that's the other thing that I think is in the book that like, because it's not to say that there were these previous sexual utopias where men could have sex with other men freely, but they often happened along power lines of young and old or different classes. Also, he talks about the kind of workshops where a master and apprentice might have a sexualized relationship. But it wasn't one, there was a discrepancy in power there between the master and the apprentice. So it's not like these were old gay utopias.

MF: That's one of the interesting things that he does with this is, it's like, there's a liberal story, and it can basically take the same material that he's looking at and say, like, "okay, there was this precapitalist utopia for gay people. Somehow, let's say, the capitalists decided to chase them out of Eden and pursue them across these centers of financial power, up until the present, at which point they finally rebelled at Stonewall and now we're free." That posits a single tradition and identity that was unbroken, that somehow crossed all these social formations. One that was unjustly persecuted, and that would recognize itself in the present as finally free?

There's a lot of things that don't really hold up about that argument. One of them is that there were these sexual norms that we would now call violent, or abusive, or rape, that was just simply how these practices happened. You don't have to be like, "Well, you know, they really should have been persecuted by the state" or "actually it was fine because they all really consented at some level." There's a real heterogeneity to the social practices, that doesn't really fit the triumphant, oppressed past, liberated future, sort of arc.

It also flatters the present and says "and now we know better, and now violence doesn't happen in sex. And all of our ways of conceiving of pleasure are totally fine for everybody involved, and we don't have any contradictions that we still need to work out." He has this skeptical view of what was a very, very effective tool for people to win real, serious changes in their condition and the present. He's not just saying, "well it wasn't actually like that and I'm here to speak the truth because I love academic freedom." It's actually a much more complicated question than we like to imagine.

S: Yeah, totally. Speaking personally in my relationship to this, there's a kind of double nostalgia that maybe falls into some of that liberal trap. When I first read Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* talking about "before there was a homosexual people weren't an identity, they did things" and I was like, "Oh, yeah, that makes so much sense." That's like liberating to think, "I don't have to be a thing I could just do whatever I want." I don't think that Foucault is necessarily saying that, but that was how I first received it, you know? And that kind of connects to the naive sort of sexual liberation, gay liberation discourse that gay sex and queer identity in different forms (like trans-ness) are inherently disruptive and revolutionary. That we'll overthrow capitalism if we can just fuck whoever we want, wherever we want. And that was a line that people took strategically also, which is maybe on the other side of looking for recognition of rights and entry into the power structures of marriage and military, etc.

There's like an nostalgia, definitely, for me for like those moments of gay liberation, where the militancy was also paired with this kind of way of thinking, like, "Oh, sex is revolutionary." I see that generally today with radical queers kind of replaying a lot of those old moments. A lot of academic stuff tends to be pessimistic about the revolutionary

structures and never were satisfactory to me, but the way that Chitty argues it, does something that helps me understand it a little bit more complex way, than to simply be pessimistic about it. Although there is certainly a pessimistic line in it. One of the ways he phrases it is that “the ideas of liberation elevate a liberal bourgeois theory of the state into the constituent of principle of human desire and all other cultural formations.” First of all, how does he help us -- in your reading and understanding -- understand the failures of gay liberation? How does it help us articulate a new pathway for our liberatory movements, starting from the positions of gay, trans, queer, whatever you want to call it, different ones that are sort of loosely linked? How do we go from this critique to like articulating a movement that really wants to be revolutionary, that wants to tear apart these hierarchies and oppression?

MF: That’s the trick, right? I think that it’s so helpful and refreshing to have someone just “here’s why this doesn’t quite work,” you know? I too, find it unbearably romantic to imagine that the sex in the 70’s could have somehow fucked its way into a utopian universe and the only reason it didn’t happen was because AIDS. I don’t want to dismiss the gravity of everything else that people were doing, it was in the context of pretty widespread, sustained, intense militancy. It wasn’t just just sex or whatever? I’m not being so Stalinist about it.

I’ve been reading this book (that I’m pretty sure Chris was reading throughout early on by) this theorist, Moishe Postone, who taught at University of Chicago where he did his undergrad. It’s this critique of what he’s calling “traditional Marxism,” “traditional theories of Marx,” that basically mistake what Marx was doing, for giving a critique of capitalism from the perspective of labor, so as to say “labor makes capitalism but then capitalists take it away, and if we just get rid of the capitalists and keep laboring in the same fashion, then we’ll have socialism and then everything’s going to be fine.” Postone is like “no, that’s not really what Marx was saying. Marx was saying actually that because of these, the contradictory character of the sort of basic categories of capitalist society: abstract labor, commodity, etc, etc, abstract time”- I don’t wanna get into the details too much, but basically “you can’t rely on a kind of like simple affirmation of your position that you find yourself in, within capital society to kind of like undo the problem. You need to find a way to self abolish, basically.” To not so not simply just get rid of everything, but transform

the present such that you're no longer reproducing your own domination.

And I think there's a kind of a symmetry in the way that Chris was trying to treat these categories around sexuality. Sexuality appears potentially to be a standpoint of critique of sort of straight society. You could imagine that all you need to do is get rid of the straight people who are preventing us from living out the free satisfaction of our desires and then we'll be able to stop upholding the larger capitalist social order that we are convinced -- and I kind of agree -- that your sexuality is a really integral part of. That's basically the kind of thesis of sexual liberation movement, right? It's like, our desire is blocked or impeded from its full expression in the social, and what we need is to find a way of removing these barriers to its kind of full expression, and then the problem is going to be over. To critique that position, and certainly not to say like, "no, it's actually fine, everything's fine. You're complaining, you're whining about nothing." There's serious vectors of misery and violence, obviously, you know it's still going on much more intensely around gender and trans people right now. But there's obvious enemies to be opposed by any kind of liberatory political formation.

The trick is to not let yourself be so mesmerized by them that you think that they are the only kind of danger, right? The whole of society needs to reproduce itself in your moment, somehow, through the mediation of these categories, and our movements have to have a delicate enough grasp of what presuppositions we might be affirming, when we are working out the kind of horizons that we're going for, or the sort of strategies that we adopt or whatever.

S: Yeah, that makes me think of this line that really stuck out to me. It's not something that is expanded upon in the book a lot, and it's a place where I want to keep thinking, maybe you have some thoughts on it. He writes, "the central contradiction connected with homosexuality, and by extension, with the category of heterosexuality and social power more generally, is that of consent. How various societies have understood consent as the basis of the exercise of power more generally." I just think there's a lot contained in there. Consent is a term that's being used a lot within our movements to reframe our thinking around justice and accountability. But I was wondering if you have thoughts on unpacking that. Like how could a queer movement or gay liberation be articulate around this idea of consent on one hand, power on

the other. Because there's something here about being kind of pushed into consent to be ruled, too, I think.

MF: Yeah, I find it really suggestive and helpful. But I'm not positive exactly what he meant. I've only been thinking about this example for an hour or so today so I hope I'm not going to walk myself into a bad position. But there's this interesting article today in the New York Times that was about touch hunger through the pandemic. And it was this person who was like, "I did sex work, I was like a dominatrix and I really liked it because I was able to be much more explicit about the type of touch and interaction and shit that I was going to get in a sexual situation. Because, like lots of women, I had childhood socialization to unwanted touch from all types of people. This past year of touch hunger during the pandemic, has really made me reconsider how much I consented to touch that I didn't want as a sex worker and I reached out to all these other sex workers. And I asked them about it too, and they're all like, 'yeah, I've consented to like...'" Basically the thrust of it was consent and desire are not the same. Rape culture can extract consent quite easily from people whether or not that's what they want or what's good for their psychic well being, etc, etc, etc. Or has anything to do with kind of like, social equality, you know. Consent, in other words, is like actually a way of reproducing exploitative power relations, and it's an integral part of a misogynist world that operates on gender balance.

I was reading that and I was like, "yeah, so then maybe consent isn't really the question, is it? Right?" If it can be the constant throughout all of these stories of like -- not all of them are traumatic -- but shitty times that people had that stayed with them and affected how they continue to operate in the world and access pleasure and things like that, maybe it's not the sufficient criterion that we are looking for to have a sexually free world. I think that kind of direction is what he's going towards, and this question of the normative order, current sexual hegemony that we all kind of live in, carry out.

It's a way of kind of like eliciting a kind of consent at a formal level, to this terrifyingly violent world. Consent to be governed by social relations that run on gendered violence. How could you possibly have a meaningful, discreet sexual encounter that's separate from that larger context? And say "yes," to that, but like, not to the rest. I think that's kind of the

direction he's going in. There's a lot of feminist legal thinking around this, that I, unfortunately, I'm not as versed in as I'd like to be, but it extends this contractual idea that you can freely enter into some kind of relation with another person in an unequal society. Sure, you can, in a practical sense, in fact it's necessary for the society to operate - you have to have this level of formal equality for its concepts of legitimation to operate. But if you don't buy the presupposition, the sort of capitalist rule, like you're an anarchist, or communist or anti-authoritarian of some sort, then that's just simply not sufficient to guide your interactions. Looking at the way these concepts are really deeply embedded in our capacity to think about relating to other people. It's tricky, you know, I wouldn't say we need to get rid of this concept and just figure it out later. There's some pretty serious contradictions that are worth following.

S: Yeah, you lay that out in a helpful way. So he talks about the norms of consent being part of the bourgeois development of sexuality, sort of like post World War Two I think in terms of like domestic heterosexual marriage. But you also connect that to like this sort of myth of the liberal subject who consents to be governed, and that's what we're kind of taught ideologically. Of course that moment of consent is always pushed outside of our actual experience or history, it's like this other time. Also going back to that kind of Edenic version of the gays being expelled. So that makes sense to me, and sexual identity and consent can be used strategically, but if we get caught up in that as the thing itself, then we're stuck in that discourse.

MF: I think that's a good way of putting it.

S: And that's why I think that's interesting too, to think about in connection to, you know, there's consent culture, but then also the kind of abolition movements and transformative justice discourse that goes around. We often use the word consent to get at those things, but the thing that like, that transformative relations are getting at, isn't about articulating consent, but articulating relations that don't operate along those same power differentials, right.

If we had to actually theorize consent in this way it would be infinitesimal, right? Like every moment would be having to consent to, and that's an impossibility in a way. I don't know. I'm also just going off

of this, the way that you kind of unpacked the example from that sex workers experience because it's also been something that's critiqued within BDSM, where they're like, "Well, it seems to be this place where consent is made very explicit, and yet here, all these examples of where that explicit consent culture can be abused, by people who have various forms of power within that culture." So yeah, I don't know if you had some thoughts on what I was saying there.

MF: It's making me think of some things that I don't think I'm capable of reproducing right now.

S: **laughs in understanding** Okay that's fine.

MF: I know it's a rich field of thought. And I'm just not going to pretend like I can contribute right now. **laughs**

S: **Totally. No, I mean, yeah, I'm just getting excited about but like, yeah, that's another conversation perhaps. So there's like a couple more things that if you're up for it that I want to touch on. You mentioned the kind of interruption that HIV/AIDS brought to queer movement. And that, you know, also coincided with further dismantling of radical movements like Black liberation and Indigenous movements. But you know, Chitty's argument has some interesting things to say about how AIDS kind of like, replays histories of control of sexuality. So I wonder if you wanted to expand any bit anymore on like, the way the history of disease and epidemics is tied to our understanding of sexuality? Because like, it was preceded by syphilis and etc. Yeah, if you had some thoughts on that, or just expanding on AIDS in relation to gay movement.**

MF: I put the final edits on the manuscript, around last April? In the first month of lockdown. And I'd been working on the texts since 2015, not consistently, but I've been sort of going through it at various different levels. That whole time, I didn't quite catch how central disease was to his narrative. Until this last April. He's pretty explicit the sort of preconditions for a modern bourgeois concept of sexuality, a sexually free body has to do with the kind of enclosures in the European countryside to bring all these new, uprooted, ex-peasants to the city, etc, etc, etc, social capital, social relations, production, blah, blah, blah. But also you need to have plumbing,

and you need to have a sort of health infrastructure that can keep people's bodies relatively clean. And this is the result of successive pandemics.

So it doesn't go into a lot of detail about this. The vagrancy laws that are first used to criminalize sodomites in northern Italy are passed in the aftermath of the Black Death, to manage this kind of collapse in feudal social order? The feudal countryside is transformed in the wake of this plague. All of a sudden, these peasants can travel in a different fashion. They need to suddenly compel them to stay in place in a new way. So they pass all these vagrancy laws: you can't be more than 100 yards from your local town or whatever. These are the same vagrancy laws that they start using to threaten the sodomites with. Secondly, syphilis, the way that it's transported from the New World kind of demonstrates the kind of the new global trade networks and relations of extraction, domination and violence, that are kind of putting Europe into a new kind of like orientation towards the rest of the rest of the world. In particular, exposing its proletarian populations to all kinds of new bodily conditions. Syphilis transforms the needs of the emerging state to manage and have a sanitary world around cities, so it's not spreading pestilence.

Cholera obviously is a similar story, you know, when you have these kind of enormous swarms, where you've kind of just dumped the factory working population. But because they're living on top of each other, they're super liable to spread disease if it shows up. So all of a sudden you need to invent plumbing and heating, epidemiology and whatever. All these modern conveniences also go into a kind of reconceptualization of public sphere so that men are no longer free to piss on the street, he says, the story is bourgeois women start showing up in public once again after centuries of being secluded in the household and they're scandalized by all these penises that are everywhere. Europe starts putting up these urinals which kind of hide the penises, but obviously also in this dialectical fashion that kind of concentrate, and eroticize...what does he call them? "Temples of urethral eroticism." So anyway, the point is there's this whole thread of existence of disease as a kind of motor of this sort of social transformation of what sexuality means, in the story that he's also telling that I didn't quite grasp for the first number of years I was working with the text, only past year that it really hit me.

Then he has this whole other story where you have the sexual, gay libera-

tionists in the 60's and 70's, who are like "we have a glorious past that we need to kind of liberate, ourselves and it, through us." And then with the arrival of HIV/AIDS, all of a sudden, the histories that these activists are telling are quite different. They are about the kind of like bodily practices that actually constitute material social reality of what homosexuality is, because that is where the virus lives. You know, that's what's salient for them, politically and essentially, it changes the sort of the way that they're theorizing about themselves and about history.

And so he's like, both of these things are quite valuable contributions to the understanding of sexuality, homosexuality, particular. Now, maybe in 2013, or whatever, the kind of apocalyptic urgency of the HIV/AIDS crisis is in the past somewhat. We can kind of be a little bit more critical or assess these histories with a bit more distance. And we're no longer under this injunction to tell politically helpful stories that will save our lives. Now we can kind of like look at why maybe these presuppositions of the political movements that made these demands which are quite productive. Also, on other moments kind of inhibited a total liberation.

S: What's interesting to think about, Hocquenghem was an early sort of utopian liberationist -- although I think he's more complex than that, because he also includes an idea of like, overcoming homosexuality -- but he was so concerned, and he didn't want to disclose his status with HIV, because he was worried that it would imperil the liberationist forms of sex that he had, that were so important to his vision of revolution. Which was like cruising and everything, but then that's something that he's been criticized for. Or that paradox of this sort of sexual liberation and his situation. But then on the other side, I'm thinking he kept it separate in a way that is problematic for, it puts a limit on it's contribution at that point.

That's not really a question *laughs* but the other side I'm thinking this book, *Sexual Hegemony* like it's maybe a weird connection, but maybe this will say something to you. I don't know if you've read it, but to me it reads like totally as a companion to Samuel Delaney's *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue*-

MF: Oh, yeah.

S: Where he's writing in the height of the crisis in New York, of the HIV/AIDS crisis in New York, and the way that's used as a political tool to criminalize sexual public sexual activity under like public health measures.

MF: Totally.

S: While still maintaining this kind of utopian vision of sexuality in the midst of a health crisis. And yeah, there's like a way that Chitty's work kind of really resonates for me with the way that Delaney articulate sexuality, and he even gets these things about consent too, because he discusses masculine violence as a kind of effective a false scarcity that's imposed on sexual availability -- which like, really parallels the idea of capitalism enforcing sort of false scarcity or creating that. This is not also well thought out, I'm kind of like, going here in this moment.

MF: Yeah, that's so funny that you say that. He cites Delaney a couple times, I think. Definitely borrowing from it. But it's so funny. So this was an adaptation of his PhD thesis. Maybe this is just how those things go. I've read it so many times. I'll be reading another book that I know Chris also read, and I'm like, "Oh, my god he's just...this is that argument," or he's just doing this, just kind of transposing that. So like, Hocquenghem in *Homosexual Desire*, in the first couple of chapters... I reread it, I'm like, "Oh, my god, that's exactly the form of argument he's doing." But then you'll read Mario Mieli and you're like, "Oh, that's what he's writing about." It's like, he's giving a direct response to Foucault *History of Sexuality, Volume One*. I'm reading *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. And it's like, oh yeah, that's the form of argument he's doing. And it's like maybe that's just what a PhD is. You kind of process all this thinking and generate something that's mostly digested, but still, it's own new object.

I think it's very unique. Also, obviously, it would be very hard to kind of combine all of those positions and not have something totally new. Delaney, he's like a legit liberationist. For whatever reason, I was going back and reading this article by one the members of the GLF. And, you know, which is like, held up as, "Oh, in the past the gay liberationists were radical and now they're assimilationist, or whatever, we shouldn't be like the GLF, blah, blah." And I was reading it, I was like, this is super misogynist, and transphobic and like pretty boring, actually. He wanted to go back

to use some term from Byron, rather than the alphabet soup that current radicals have. And just like, “okay, man, like, sorry, that you got annoyed by some kids.” But Delaney is like... I’m sure he has some weird cranky positions, too-

S: *laughs*

MF: But at least in terms of his sexual politics, about the sex that he has, and sex he writes about and puts in circulation, I mean he’s just like, he’s just free. He’s like, I’m here to experience pleasure in all types of bodies and write all about it. I understand the sort of social and political dynamics that are flowing through the bodies in this moment, and it has a lot to do with capitalist development. That is such a valuable tradition, and not one that is always found in the more properly political legacy works or whatever. I don’t remember what the precise question was.

S: I didn’t really articulate a question. I was just kind of trying to put some pieces together. But that actually helped me because I think why I reached for Delaney, after talking about the interruption that HIV/AIDS brought in to the liberation movement is that he’s still able, he writes in the 80s, about the work that was being done around care and support and health. But he also is able, within that moment, to still envision liberation as politics and sex as connected. Perhaps part of it is his fiction, that he’s a fiction writer, but he can go into places... The things that I like about Hocquenghem is that he ultimately doesn’t want to hold on to any of these categories. And that’s why he upsets people who want to find liberation through these categories. And then that’s also what Chitty says, ultimately, and maybe this is where we can bring this to the current moment. The argument ends up, there’s a pessimism that’s like, “okay, liberation isn’t gonna be just gay, because the gay identity is a product of capitalism.” We’ve known that for a while, but he articulates that in a new way that allows us to get more at the complexity of it.

To get to a final question: if the problem of queerness is created by the development of the modern state then we can reach liberation without also overthrowing the state. So then the question I keep coming back to and I don’t think this has to be pessimistic or nihilistic, what’s left for gay liberation or radical queer movement? Does it need to be

called that? Or another way maybe of putting it is like, where do we find points of solidarity that can keep like delinking gay liberation from identity and interiority, but open places to work together? Because the power effects that Chitty traces historically happened to other people that wouldn't identify as gay too, right? So I mean my basic question is like, where do you think this leaves us, radical queers who are also fighting for liberation?

MF: Yeah, that's a hard question. I don't have a great answer, like, practically, pragmatically. I think that we're in a really weird moment. I think that we're living through some type of transition between, let's say...I don't know, historical period. You wouldn't want to make a prediction about any epochal change from inside of it. But it certainly seems as if the kind of thing -- you were talking about this a little bit earlier -- the kind of social order that being gay or being queer was dissonant to, is kind of defunct. There's a number of different ways you can characterize that it has, you know. Some people like to call it Fordism. Some people like to call it kind of, like the classical post post-war capitalist period, where social reproduction is kind of like privatized in the hetero family. And that's been in kind of a bit of crisis for the past forty years now, or more, right? It was like 50 years since Stonewall a couple of years ago. It's obviously a crisis that lasts that long...maybe you don't call it a crisis after a certain point. You just call it a new sort of period? So there have been ways of stabilizing social reproduction even though that type of family organization is no longer hegemonic. But then that means because it's not hegemonic, maybe it wasn't necessarily a feature of this particular order of capitalism, like social reproduction still takes place, even if it's like largely mediated by the market or debt financed, or even kind of effected through queer forms of chosen family or distributed sort of community care models, or whatever.

I think what is useful about the political position of queerness being the inheritor of a tradition of really serious attempts at grasping how these different orders of social reality connect and reproduce each other. Because, you know, it's really easy to say "Oh, sex has nothing to do with the economy, real material productive activity," or on the other hand it's easy to say "Oh, it's just a mechanical expression of class belonging," and that gets you to kind of fucked up positions of proletarians aren't queer, and then therefore it's bougie give a shit about pleasure. That's just never been historically the case.

So there's a really powerful and valuable tradition of thinking that has been handed down to us, I suppose. At a great cost, against serious genocidal peril, for multiple generations. But we're in this ambivalent position where the object of that tradition of critique has transformed in ways that it didn't totally foresee. Which is, in some ways great, because then some of the real horrible shit is taken care of, or like no longer as urgent. In other ways, it means that we need to kind of rework those traditions and presuppositions and what we inherit in a way that's kind of faithful to them, but still kind of gives us a way out of the present because we still need to get out.

One of the useful things that there is still on offer in the queer movement is this ability, is this repertoire that we've developed, of grasping how what appeared to be natural or extra-economic forms of social existence that have a kind of objective or necessary or compulsory character, right? You don't choose whether or not you have a sexuality, you just choose whether or not to kind of live it out, or express it in a particular way. But it's something that's, you know, in the social world that we live in, it's given to you. There's all types of ways of that that evolves. But it's an interesting confirmation of this sort of objective nature. Whether or not you want it, it's the larger political activity or asexuality, right? Like, this is a type of identity position that like, is clearly real and meaningful and valid in exactly the same ways as all the other kind of allosexual identities, but it doesn't negate the existence of having a sexuality as a kind of imperative, as a social sort of unavoidable fact. And, in fact, it confirms it, in this kind of negative way.

So a queer movement would be one that is capable of grasping these imperatives as intimately related to questions of revolution, solving these imperatives politically, through some type of collective struggle means investigating why they take the form that they do in this particular society with this set of compulsory socially objective relations. And not just saying, like, "Oh, it's natural," or, "oh, you just want to do this because I feel like it" or, "it's socially constructed", or whatever, so that we just need to kind of tell enough people not to do this in this way that we can get out of it. Some level of that tactic is successful, you know, it's necessary to any kind of social movement, unfortunately. You have to kind of do the really thankless work of yelling at people or bothering them about stuff that they think is the reflex, but there's also a different level that it exists on and we

need to have a kind of way of grasping that. And that's not at all a concrete answer. But I think that's the kind of precious insight or tradition in the queer liberatory lineage that I think is really useful.

S: Since we're forming our discussion around this book, what this book does is "historicize the history of sexuality" -- I think that's something he says. I'm thinking about how Hocquenghem talks about how the leftists are always fighting the last revolution. If we get caught up in the conditions that produce gay liberation -- which was like, according to Chitty, the policing of sexuality, that led to confrontation, like fighting police in the streets, which led to Stonewall -- if we're fighting that war now that's the wrong war. Because, you know, homosexuality has been included it's no longer a threat. It's not the node of control in the same way. It is in other places, I guess, like, particularly around trans-ness right now is being articulated.

The other thing is like, this book doesn't give us a predictive tool. But since he articulates all these moments around these times of financialization, we're in that moment, right? We're in a time of sexual hegemony potentially changing. So that term can give us something to think about the way sexuality is politicized. Not as like a simple dynamic of "yes or no" or "repressed or liberated"; but it's a subtle tool that we need to try to understand how to wield for ourselves and not for the state. I guess we're still inundated with all those slogans that are so intoxicating from that time when there was way more visible militancy, you know, and the social war was a lot more generally visible at that time. So.

MF: Yeah, people picking up arms in a different way.

S: Yeah. I like, get left in this pessimistic place of "gay liberation has been totally captured". But that's also an old story.

The new articulations of queerness are potential locations of solidarity. Seeing the work that pinko does too, in terms of the way that the journal kind of brings together different fronts, I think is helpful to think through those kinds of modes. There's a lot and I think it's expansive, right? In the two volumes, it brings together different movement work on different fronts, right? There's stuff around sex work,

there's stuff like the Trans History Project, there is theories of sexuality, there's a mix of old discourse, like reprinted texts from the old movement, there's like new takes on things. I think I like that because it's like seeing it as a coalitional politics.

MF: That's nice. It's nice to think about it like that. With Pinko, one of the fantasies that I had, when I started working on it was that we would have a kind of a venue for bringing together a bunch of different perspectives that hadn't really been in conversation, but also hopefully trying to consolidate what might be a new position that I don't know that we have yet. I mean, I'm hopeful, and I'm sure that it reads differently from the other side, you know, it's more maybe more coherent, or more like, all in sync.

But the other thing that I thought would be important, to have a magazine or some kind of a record going was of these struggles around sexuality as the current dominant, hegemonic mode begins to sort of transform. I thought it would be useful to have a kind of place that was attending to the different ways that people are trying to work out what it means to be militant with these problems, or these concepts or whatever.

I think one of my favorite pieces was the first issue -- and I don't want to say this in like a too simple way -- but it was the interview with these two trans people who went down to a coal ship, a coal train blockade in Kentucky, I think. And they set up a kind of classic encampment-style protest occupation thing that has been a really dominant form for a lot of types of protests for the past decade or so. We had this interesting conversation with them, while they were there at the camp. They have this very hopeful, like, "we're here to support the miners, but we're also members of the community, we're from Appalachia, and obviously there's, maybe there's some tension around our transness or whatever, but like, we're able to talk with them in a kind of chill way and resolve this conflict." When it came to us, there's this cool story about precisely that. This coalitional thing, trans struggles and the classical worker militancy thing can come together in these wildcat places where they block circulation. It's this perfect illustration of so many political trends, like, we love this fusion.

Then actually, what ended up happening was in between the interviews that we did and the publication of the magazine, some Trump dude showed up, basically, and took over the camp, or like, installed themselves

in the camp, and the miners basically weren't able to reestablish their own control. The trans people were like "this is not a chill place for us to be and we can't trust you dudes to kick out this fucking biker gang or whatever, so we're leaving" which is a reasonable thing to do.

Anyway so we ended up having to run this kind of long intro paragraph about why they didn't quite work. Like what they thought was the fissures in their previous assessment that they've been able to do this interesting coalitional thing. I don't want to tell the story like, "haha they were proved wrong" but I thought having the space to kind of investigate, there's quite a lot to be learned in figuring out the limits also, of these forms of political action and political sort of conduct and protest and thinking. I was glad that we had this venue where we weren't like, "Oh, we have to give this kind of posi story about, you know, the powerful moment of unity between the macho miner dude and the less macho trans people or whatever." It wasn't a kind of affirmative thing. Like, what was interesting was that we could actually take the time to take apart why this in particular, this one thing didn't work. Because obviously that's going to happen much more than winning, you know? There's a lot in figuring out how to think about how things come apart and what to do with that, and what to learn about that. What I find interesting about the potential for Pinko.

S: That makes sense. And that's with the kind of crisis theories, or we look at the sort of moments of crisis as potential openings for something, even though all the past moments haven't been moments of winning, they're moments of loosening where other things can happen. That's where I'm at right now. Instead of thinking about that punctual moment look at the places where things are being done differently in the present, and work from there. I don't know if it's aggregate or what, but we can't tell these deterministic histories, which are used both in like liberationist theories and repressive theories, you know?

MF: Yeah, totally.

S: Well, we've been talking for a while. So I don't know if there's like any final thing that you kind of want to touch on. Is there any way you want to like direct people to find your work, other than read *Sexual Hegemony* that's put out by Duke University Press?

MF: Yeah read that. Exactly. Yeah, go find that on, I mean the Duke website as a good place to buy it from. I'll put a plug: the Duke Press, the people who work there are unionizing. So you better support them if you have any kind of interaction with Duke. Maybe if you buy the book, you should add a note saying you recognize the union or whatever we find is effective about those things.

S: **I signed today on their author's support letter and I saw your name.**
laughs

MF: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, actually, that's funny. I think if you want to buy the Hocquenghem translation that I did, I think I will personally have to fulfill it because the publisher is sailing on a boat in the Arctic now and she dropped off all the remaining copies that are now in my closet. So if you really want to order a copy, I guess I can put that in the mail. But I wouldn't I wouldn't count on that being like a prompt delivery. And then Pinko you can find it at **pinko.online**

S: **Cool. Well, thank you so much for taking all the time to talk.**

MF: Yeah, thank you so much for asking such awesome questions. I hope it was coherent.

S: I think you did a really good job explaining the main ideas of the book, also in a way that like helped me think about it. Like, because I've read the book and probably a lot of people listening won't have read it you brought up new aspects of it for me. I think it was really clear.



The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

You can send us letters at:

The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

Email us at:

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or **thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com**

To hear our past shows for free, visit:

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org>