

Against Equality, against capitalism:
towards an economic critique
of gay marriage

*Karma R. Chávez, Ryan Conrad and Yasmin Nair
for Against Equality*

Liberation would mean the end of the gayworld as we now know it, with its high premium on momentary and furtive contacts. It would involve a breakdown of the barriers between male and female homosexuals, and between gays and straights. Masculinity and femininity would cease to be sharply differentiated categories... – Dennis Altman¹

In November 2011, the gay marriage video 'It's Time' went viral, going on to score so many hits that it has been declared 'arguably the most effective marriage equality video of all time'. Watching it in the United States, we assumed it came from the offices of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) or the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), the two major gay rights organisations that have driven the gay marriage agenda. The tropes were familiar to us from years of watching various homonormative campaigns: an

entirely white set of characters; the story of a date between two men that progresses to romance to meeting the families to moving in together; and, finally, a marriage proposal, complete with the offer of a ring, made on bended knee.

To our surprise, we learned that the video in fact originated in Australia.² The fact that an Australian gay marriage video should be indiscernible from one produced in the United States speaks of the troubling universality of the gay marriage campaign, which hinges upon a notion of the gay subject as a particularly racialised figure embedded in a comfortably upper-middle-class environment and untroubled by any forms of inequality other than in the shape of 'marriage rights'. Gay marriage thus makes several border crossings to emerge in international contexts denuded of any cultural or economic specificities, its central plea for 'marriage equality' serving as its only and celebrated justification.

In other words, gay marriage has become universal but, somehow, the concept of liberation *from* marriage, as Altman describes it, has not translated in quite the same way across time. Most mainstream gay and lesbian organisations in the United States, such as the HRC (Human Rights Campaign) and NGLTF (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), the professional-class career activists who prop up these organisations, and the wealthy funders that control the dialogue about our communities' priorities, are fervently demanding mere inclusion in systems and institutions designed for the disposal of queer and trans bodies. The national campaigns for gay marriage in the United States have been duping many LGB and sometimes T activists into the so-called 'fight of our lives'.³ This has been done with an affective appeal about how no one should be allowed to tell us whom we can and cannot love while simultaneously drawing on the simple logic of rights-based fairness. These two rhetorical appeals have been replicated around the world, regardless of regional context, obscuring the fact that marriage has little to

do with love and everything to do with accumulation of power, property, and capital.

Against Equality challenges the centrality of marriage within a neoliberal and highly privatised public sphere. We consider the damage done by those arguing for gay marriage, without simply focusing on the easy target of the 'right'. An anti-capitalist critique is at the centre of our arguments.

Historic critiques of the institution of marriage are politically varied and numerous, from Emma Goldman's fiery 1911 essay 'Marriage and love', in which she so aptly refers to marriage as a 'state and church begotten weed', to William Hogarth's eighteenth-century *Marriage à-la-mode* paintings, depicting the wealth and property that continues to be the central tenet of the modern-day marriage contract. Although our critique is in many ways unique and historically specific, we are not the first queers to oppose marriage. Broadly, there have been three threads to this critique so far. The first, most evident in the 1970s and borrowed from radical feminism, critiqued marriage as a capitalist and sexist practice that rendered women and children the property of the state. Following this was the idea that gay sexuality needed to be unconstrained by the bourgeois confines of marriage while roaming freely in a queer public sexual sphere. While we are sympathetic to the need for a public sexual culture (we have theorised on it and are engaged in it), we find that advocating for this alone is not a sufficiently political and radical act. It is no coincidence that public sex gatherings such as the International Mr. Leather conference are filled with gay marriage supporters. The relationship between a vigorous public sexual culture and a radical *political transformation* of the same is tenuous to non-existent at best.

As Dennis Altman remarked, for gay liberation to occur, the nuclear family would need to be seen 'as only one form of possible social organisation, not as the norm from which everything else seems a deviation'.⁴ This idea relates to the more recent critique,

which has been of the *emphasis* on marriage. The 'Beyond same-sex marriage' statement which, while bold for its time (and one of us was an original signatory), posits marriage as part of a range of options without fully engaging the damage done by its centrality and positions the 'right' as the chief opponent to reform without noting the gay marriage movement's extreme social and economic conservatism.

The anti-capitalist critique has even disappeared from the public discourse on straight marriage. Marriage is now seen as simply one of the choices available to women. Choice is the mantra of neo-liberalism; it justifies everything from the housing crisis ('people *chose* to make bad decisions') to the practices of a banking industry that disguises its dangerous financial practices in the celebration of its own growth. When the critique of marriage as a capitalist and sexist institution disappears from public discourse, the result is a denigration of people's ability to form bonds, sustain networks of care, make comfortable livings or gain basic benefits such as health care and inheritance outside the heteronormative construction of 'family'. When marriage becomes simply another 'choice' within a privatised 'rights' discourse, we lose a radical vision of transformation in favour of the state's perception of the family as an economic unit, while it absolves itself of any responsibility. It is no accident that the emphasis on motherhood as a 'choice' has come with a cultural emphasis that women *should* choose it. Along the way, the US state has dramatically reduced resources for public education and child welfare, leaving mothers scrambling for childcare.

Similarly, one argument for gay marriage is that it should be a choice gays can make to gain spousal health care. This argument contradictorily places *marriage* as a choice but ignores that the lack of health care *forces* people to marry. Between us, we have lost count of the number of friends compelled to marry because they were afraid of being driven to destitution by healthcare expenses (the leading cause of bankruptcy in the United States).⁵

Instead of acknowledging marriage's failures, national gay marriage campaigns swim against the tide of history by deploying hollow love and family rhetoric. As noted by gay historian John D'Emilio in 'The marriage fight is setting us back', the material lives of many heterosexual families presently look more like the imagined lives of homosexuals.⁶ This has been reflected in American popular culture since the 1980s, in sitcoms such as *Kate & Ally*, *Full House* and *My Two Dads*, where the blended families represented, though often reproducing white and middle-class norms, are comprised of caretakers and children unrelated by blood, romance or marriage. To the contrary, today's gay and lesbian activists try to revive a family-values narrative that looks and sounds no different from the way the Christian right narrowly imagines family.

At the core of the gay marriage issue is whether or not we, as a socially and economically conscious queer and trans community, want to settle for mere inclusion in exploitative systems and institutions. Marriage is inherently structured, in its ceremonies and traditions, to exploit queer and trans people in developing nations whose sweatshop labour produces designer wedding garments and blood diamonds.⁷ This exploitation is rendered invisible when First-World gays and lesbians celebrate the pomp and circumstance of their weddings at the expense of the labour that makes it possible. Gay marriage, in its overt reaffirmation of the worst traditions, persuades society to ignore the disposal of queer subjects.

In light of such matters, how do we resist the profoundly neoliberal and conservative gay marriage agenda? One way is by openly opposing the gay marriage movement and voicing and circulating the kinds of critiques we lay out here and in our first book, *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*.⁸ In addition, queers and allies should become more intentional about integrating an anti-capitalist vision into our work and activism. For instance,

one of us heard a representative from a Chicago-based single-payer healthcare advocacy group make a speech at a gay marriage rally about 'solidarity' with the gay marriage movement's argument for health care. We connected with colleagues within that group and pointed out the hypocrisy of such rhetoric coming from, of all people, someone advocating healthcare reform. They concurred that both the rhetoric and the political strategy needed to change.

How do we make similar connections in light of what many are celebrating as the dawn of an era of international queer activism? We see a brave new world of infinite possibilities for solidarity but are wary of replicating the universalising and colonialist mentality of (mostly) white gay men 'saving' mostly brown gay people.⁹ We also fear the foreign policy implications of such pronouncements as Hillary Clinton's 2012 International Human Rights Day speech proclaiming 'gay rights as human rights', given just two short months after the end of the US military's 'Don't ask, don't tell' (DADT) policy. As we demonstrate in our second book, *Against Equality: Don't Ask to Fight Their Wars*, one of the problems with advocating an end to this policy was that it functioned to legitimise US military actions around the world in the name of tolerance and diversity. The DADT repeal was framed merely as a national civil rights issue and a movement in the right direction for global LGBT rights, without ever acknowledging the profound international implications for people (LGBT and otherwise) in parts of the world vulnerable to US intervention. In light of escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, for example, where the United States calls for the spread of democracy to a country that supposedly lacks gay rights and women's rights, and insists on keeping 'all options on the table', we worry about the ends towards which international gay rights will be deployed.

In our own work with LGBTQ activists internationally, we are aware of our privilege in questioning the notion of solidarity when so many justifiably see a global queer identity as an affirmation

in the face of often-deadly circumstances. We seek multiple and complicated queer possibilities. In February 2011, representatives of the Palestinian queer groups Al-Qaws and Aswat toured the United States. The fact that they were identified as Palestinian and not Arab groups, and that the accompanying literature complicated notions of 'coming out' and 'visibility', gives us hope for a queer dialogue built upon a recognition, not an erasure, of critical geopolitical differences untethered by colonialist notions of a global gay identity. In January 2012, a group of LGBTIQ activists, academics, cultural workers and artists took a solidarity tour of the West Bank, resulting in a profound statement of queer solidarity with Palestine.¹⁰ Solidarity is complicated and perplexing, as is the notion of a radically transformed society, lessons Altman articulated for gay liberation four decades ago. Both require us to continue resisting the violence of church, state and capital embodied in the gay marriage movement. Through our critique and actions, we seek pathways towards a queer future where we can all find ways to meet our material and emotional needs on our own terms and without sublimating ourselves to neoliberalism's global demand to give up on critical difference.

1 Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Liberation and Oppression*, NYU Press, New York City, 1993, p. 115.

2 "The story and actor behind Australia's phenomenally successful marriage equality video, 'It's Time'", Towleroad, 12 January 2011, www.towleroad.com/2011/12/its-time2.html.

3 As stated in a 2009 EqualityMaine pro-gay marriage mailer.

4 Altman, *Homosexual*, p. 115.

5 However, most industrialised nations provide essential services such as healthcare regardless of marital status – a fact ignored by US gay marriage advocates when they point to such countries as Canada as beacons of 'gay marriage rights'.

6 John D'Emilio, 'The marriage fight is setting us back', *Gay & Lesbian Review*, November–December 2006, www.glreview.com/issues/13.6/13.6-demilio.php.

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- 7 For a detailed account of the “wedding industrial complex” see: Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, Routledge, New York City, 1999, Chapter 2.
- 8 Ryan Conrad (ed.), *Against Equality: Queer Critiques of Gay Marriage*, Against Equality Publishing Collective, Lewiston, Maine, 2010.
- 9 Several such prominent activists come to mind, but as Sarah Ahmed points out, this is not particular only to a few but a symptom of gay international organizing. Sarah Ahmed, “Problematic Proximities, Or why Critiques of ‘Gay Imperialism’ Matter”, *Alana Lentin*, November 9, 2009, <http://www.alanalentin.net/2009/11/09/problematic-proximities-or-why-critiques-of-gay-imperialism-matter/>. For more on this syndrome also see Scott Long, “Irresponsibility, ignorance, and self-declared ‘experts’ on Iran”, *A Paper Bird: Sex, Rights and the World*, June 7, 2012, <http://paper-bird.net/2012/06/07/irresponsibility-ignorance-and-self-declared-experts-on-iran/>; or Aviva Stahl, “On Hate: A Response to Peter Tatchell”, *The Multicultural Politic*, April 3, 2013, <http://www.tmponline.org/2013/04/03/on-hate-peter-tatchell/>.
- 10 ‘An open letter to LGBTIQ communities and allies on the Israeli occupation of Palestine’, 25 January 2012, www.queersolidaritywithpalestine.com.