

Part IV

Taking Sexual Politics Home

Introduction

In 1972 a group of Gay Liberation Front squatters wrote to the Notting Hill Housing Trust, which was attempting to evict them:

We are one unmarried couple and a family of 12 gay men who decided to live together in a rented house in Brixton. There we were harassed by gangs of local queer bashers. [...] We came to Notting Hill principally because most of us had been squeezed out of rooms in the district in the first place. [...] Where must we go? Back into our cells in lonely bedsits?¹

The letter signals shifts in approach and consciousness amongst queer men. There was now a sense of rights, of a collective position, and of new possibilities (albeit here potentially curtailed) for living differently. We can certainly identify some of these things before – not least with Orton – but a fresh stridency was now palpable. In the years that followed the home lives of gay men were opened out in new ways, subject to fresh scrutiny on the part of the media, and fought over in local council committee-rooms as equality became a new watch word. AIDS and HIV meant changes to the ways many men lived out their home lives and also adjustments in welfare and housing policy. I have already discussed how the stereotype of the domestically stylish queer was elaborated in the late twentieth century and illustrated the new visibility and possibilities associated with gay fatherhood.² This introduction tracks the closely related politicization of issues of housing for gay men in these various contexts, while the two case-study chapters consider in part the impact of this politics on a group of squatters in

Brixton in the 1970s and on photographer Ajamu X (chapter 7), and on the film-maker Derek Jarman (chapter 8).

For many a decisive shift came with the activism and message of the Gay Liberation Front between 1970 and 1972.³ The Front attempted to bring leftist, identity, and sexual politics together (though not altogether happily or straightforwardly),⁴ and sought a sexual and social revolution that would reconfigure family, sexual, and emotional relations and 'abolish all forms of social oppression'.⁵ Through various groups, campaigns, and direct actions (or 'zaps') men and women in the Front challenged bigotry and misinformation whilst also looking to their own behaviour and preconceptions through consciousness-raising and experiments in communal living. GLF communards tried to jettison notions of privacy, private property, and monogamy and to provide a counter to the idealized nuclear home and family which they saw embedding sexism, homophobia, and capitalism, and inhibiting self-expression and self-exploration.⁶ The nuclear family was in these ways seen as dangerous and in any case, as a ubiquitous model, a myth: the 1971 census had shown that less than a third of households could be described in these terms and only one in ten had a male breadwinner and full-time housewife.⁷ This 'traditional' organization had certainly been questioned before,⁸ but there was now a more thoroughgoing politicisation of home, family and domesticity through writing associated with Gay and Women's Liberation, through a renewed interest in precedent experiments in living (on the part of Edward Carpenter, for example),⁹ through a new radical psychiatry,¹⁰ and through the direct experience and local visibility of radical squats and communes. Such ideas were rehearsed in the GLF magazine *Come Together*, in *Gay News* (from 1972) and in *Gay Left* (from 1975) – underscoring the connections between a politicised gay and politicised domestic life. One issue of *Come Together* was titled 'Fuck the Family' and suggested the ways true liberation depended on the jettisoning of family forms as most people had known them. It was, however, not the abolition but the reform of family that compelled many Gay and Women's Liberationists.¹¹ After a backlash against anti-family rhetoric in the mid-1970s, a trio of feminist sociologists argued that liberationists sought not to reject but to embrace the 'best' of the 'ideals' of family: 'intimacy, commitment, nurturance, collectivity and individual autonomy'.¹² The letter from gay communards cited earlier similarly retained the language and some of the associations of family: 'We are as close as any nuclear family', the letter went on, 'we hear so much about the plight of broken families, but we are surrounded on all sides by attempts to break our family'.¹³

The London GLF petered out during 1972 after a walk-out by many of the women and conflict over approaches and emphasis – especially between the leftist ‘politicos’ and those experimenting with radical drag, gender-bending and alternative living.¹⁴ Though the GLF was short-lived, its impact was tangible in subsequent debates about family, campaigning around AIDS and Clause 28 in the 1980s and 1990s, and even in the legislative programme of the New Labour government from 1997.¹⁵ More immediately men and women involved in or influenced by the GLF carried its perspectives and activism forward in local groups and in continuing and further experiments in living like the squats in Brixton. By reshaping ideas of sex and sexuality, Women’s and Gay Liberation opened out new possibilities for sexual relations and domestic life. As a ‘revolutionary’ moment, though, it needs to be seen as both a new spur to action and lifestyle change and also as an articulation of changes already in process.¹⁶ Moreover, if there were new voices and a fresh visibility, this was not a mass movement. Only a handful of gays and lesbians were directly involved in zaps and other activities. GLFs tended to be metropolitan and without the responsibilities of home, work and family that might require more caution and conformity. Squatting, communal living, experimental sex and coming out were still things that did not feel possible for most queer men and women. Others felt a loss in the new movement. Some counter cultural encounters from the fifties – in the cross-over identifications of queer men, prostitutes and new Afro-Caribbean immigrants in London’s Notting Hill, for example – did not map easily onto the new identity politics.¹⁷ Derek Jarman and Carl Marshall were, meanwhile, a little older than most GLFers and had already felt different or differently conceptualized freedoms arising out of 1960s youth and counterculture.¹⁸ They had found other ways to live differently and without joining communes and squats. These were not the only ways of practising politics at home.

So while the liberationists and communards certainly had an impact in terms of setting an agenda and providing precedents for political organizing and action,¹⁹ for many people this activism and lifestyle seemed peripheral. It is important to remember that many queer men continued to forge domestic lives which echoed those of previous generations. Moreover, sexual and social conservatism was sufficiently ingrained in broader attitudes and behaviours to encourage the championing by Margaret Thatcher’s governments of (supposed) Victorian and family values from 1979 – ideas which took hold to an extent in the wider conservative backlash of the 1980s. This was a decade when the putative dangers of the permissive society were articulated forcefully

by government and the media, and when Labour was pilloried for its 'loony' support of 'minorities'. A platform speaker at the 1985 Tory party proclaimed (to applause): 'if you want a queer for a neighbour, vote Labour'.²⁰ Gays, lesbians and single mothers especially were sharply criticised. The former were subject to the infamous Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) which stated that local authorities 'shall not [...] promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. There seemed to be a wider hardening of attitudes towards homosexuality. In 1983 62 per cent of people surveyed disapproved of gay relationships; by 1987 this had risen to 74 per cent. In the same year – and providing ammunition for the government in its pursuit of Section 28 – 93 per cent per cent stated that gay adoption should be forbidden,²¹ compared to 63 per cent in 1979.²² As deaths from AIDS-related illnesses peaked at the end of the decade, prosecutions for consensual homosexual acts reached their highest level since records began – 3065 in 1989. This exceeded even the levels during the so-called witch-hunt against homosexuals in the mid-1950s.²³

Partly as a result of previous organizing and consciousness raising, gays and lesbians campaigned as never before, entrenching the association between gay lives, a leftist and activist politics, and (in the wake of Section 28 especially) issues of family. Early Gay Pride marches had been passionate but relatively small in the 1970s and early 1980s, but Section 28 brought 40,000 people out in 1988. In 1990 the newspaper *Capital Gay* observed that the lesbian and gay movement had 'come of age': 'we have [...] taken to the streets in the biggest ever lesbian and gay demonstrations, the media coverage has been massive and the visibility of our community has rarely, if ever, been greater'.²⁴ It was through such mass public demonstrations and media and parliamentary confrontations, and also through private debate among family members, friends and neighbours that sexual difference was brought more fully into people's consciousness.²⁵ In this we can still mark the importance of Gay Liberation in the early 1970s but gesture also to a second vociferous wave of radicalism in the late 1980s relating specifically (and more narrowly) to issues of housing, Section 28, and HIV and AIDS.

Housing was highlighted as a central issue for gay men in this period in terms of prejudice in the private rental market, council-house allocation, and specialist provision for people with AIDS. The gay press was key in steering attention towards an issue which was seen to present particular challenges (though also possibilities) for gay men.²⁶ A feature in *Gay News* in 1972 investigated ongoing prejudice,²⁷ although

the 'shock' results of an accommodation survey a few issues later suggested a more permissive rental market than had been assumed. 'Accommodation agencies have come out almost unanimously in favour of gays' on the 'grounds of their reliability and cleanliness', it said. Landlords contacted directly were slightly more equivocal, though only 3 out of 33 were totally opposed to having gay tenants. 'The flat hunting business in and around London just doesn't have the anti-gay drama that we first believed it did', the paper concluded.²⁸

Personal ads in *Gay News* enlarged the possibility for finding gay and gay friendly landlords and tenants. Sometimes there was an implied or explicit deal on rent relating to sex, companionship or domestic chores, signalling a desire on the part of some men for more than a conventional lodging or sharing arrangement. A 'young man' in North London 'require[d] another to share my modern house N. London and form sincere friendship. Not camp but good looking. The right guy is more important than excessive rent'. In the same issue a 'slim, hairy' 50-year old sought a 'young person [...] non effeminate, no rent, no ties or restrictions. Photo appreciated slim, well-built [...] Genuine friendship needed'.²⁹ The limits of desirability and acceptability become clear in these ads. Around two in ten adverts in the run of *Gay News* sought non-effeminate non-camp house sharers or tenants in that by now familiar repudiation of femininity on the queer home front. This led others to seek rooms specifically on their own terms. 'Real gay brother (camp) and sister need a flat up to £15 prefer unfurnished' wrote one pair;³⁰ another, more despairing: 'unfurnished flat required London by two genuine gays early 1940s. Fed up with furnished rooms and prejudice, will understanding landlord please help'.³¹ Alongside such ads, the paper flagged housing alternatives (like squats and communes) and sources of housing help and guidance (including Lesbian and Gay Switchboard).

Homelessness was by this time recognized as a particular problem among gay and lesbian young people, who, having come out, were obliged or felt the need to leave family homes. CHAR – the national campaign for single homeless people – observed in 1989 that 'harassment is one of the major causes of homelessness among lesbians and gay men', concluding that 11 per cent of young gay men and women were evicted by their parents.³² A survey of callers to Lesbian and Gay Switchboard found that one in four attributed their particular housing problems to their sexuality.³³ Homeless charities, housing associations and co-ops began in the 1980s to include specific policy initiatives to support homeless gay men. Gay charity Stonewall Housing (launched in

1982), for example, opened a hostel in 1988 amidst much controversy.³⁴ The *ad hoc*, word-of-mouth housing solutions for queer men with limited resources of earlier in the postwar period endured, but there were now more formalized avenues of support and a greater visibility of different housing options – from gay house-shares flagged in the gay press to squats, co-ops, housing associations and council housing.

In the 1980s The Greater London Council (GLC) and left-wing local London Borough Councils (especially Lambeth, Islington, Hackney and Haringey) began tackling discrimination directly in their policy on housing. There were a number of reasons for council engagement with these issues at this time – including the rise of a new generation of Labour party activists schooled in liberationist and countercultural politics, a more visible gay constituency in the Labour Party, and a broader intellectual shift in left-wing politics away from class and towards broader notions of social justice.³⁵ Housing issues were increasingly examined as part of an equal-opportunities agenda, contributing to a broader shift in lesbian and gay politics away from GLF-style social revolution.³⁶ By 1986, 10 of the 36 London boroughs had an equal-opportunities policy statement for gays and lesbians,³⁷ and though action was uneven it was significant in bringing consideration of gay and lesbian needs on to agendas in the early to mid-1980s in terms especially of homelessness, abuse, and succession rights for gay couples in council property³⁸ – an urgent problem in the context of AIDS.

In 1985 central government had – seemingly inadvertently and without any direct reference to AIDS – laid the groundwork for a local council response to the housing crisis many men with AIDS found themselves in. The Homeless Persons Housing Act of 1985 outlined the situations in which single people might be assessed as being in priority need – that was either because of ‘threats of violence’ from another person in the same accommodation or because of ‘vulnerability’ ‘as a result of handicap or physical disability or other special reason’.³⁹ While 39 per cent of local authorities nationally did not consider an AIDS diagnosis on its own to constitute a priority, in London where the problem was most acute almost all councils did.⁴⁰ Because many men with AIDS were relatively young, they had often not secured stable or permanent accommodation and frequently faced harassment or a lack of support from elsewhere.⁴¹ The issue for councils, though, was the pressure on resources. Hammersmith and Fulham council reported that even as a priority, 40 per cent of people with AIDS died before being permanently housed. It had to use the private rental market to meet the extra demand.⁴² This was all in the context of a sharp reduction in

funding for local authority house building programmes and the right for tenants to buy their council homes, which, from 1980, shifted a significant amount of council housing into the private sector.⁴³

In light of the new engagement with housing equality, the *Mail*, the *Express* and the *Evening Standard* especially ran stories on how local council measures encouraged homosexuality, placed young homosexuals at risk of abuse,⁴⁴ flouted the age of consent laws,⁴⁵ provided 'a queue jumpers' charter' for gays,⁴⁶ and placed 'normal' families at a disadvantage.⁴⁷ When Lambeth Council became the first nationally to designate homeless people with AIDS as in priority housing need there was 'outrage' in the *Express*. Under a banner headline 'AIDS Gays to Get Council Housing', the paper cited the fears of a local Tory councillor that the borough would be 'turn[ed] into a Mecca for these people, with Lambeth being flooded by gay men claiming they have AIDS and then demanding council housing'.⁴⁸ These press responses hinged on ideas of legitimacy and of who was within or beyond the purview of civic and state support.

The Conservative government meanwhile refused to include gay and lesbian couples in reform of council house succession rights in the Housing Acts of 1980 and 1985; it abolished the GLC and other metropolitan councils in 1986; and most directly, as we have seen, it introduced Section 28 to the Local Government Act of 1988.⁴⁹ A key issue in this measure, and again in the further adjustment to the Housing Act which in 1996 (which finally gave partnership succession rights in council property to all couples) was one of pretence. Section 28 alluded to the pretend families of homosexuals. The 1996 Act raised the apparent problem of determining 'whether a homosexual relationship is genuine'.⁵⁰ The status of two men living together was still causing more uncertainty than a man and a woman sharing (even though the latter might also be 'just friends'). The flood of 'AIDS gays' moving to Lambeth might, remember, only be 'claiming' to be ill.

Despite the press vitriol, this issue of pretence, and the practical difficulties of housing shortfalls for local councils, something significant had changed in a relatively short space of time and in response to a particular crisis. Gay men in need increasingly felt they could expect housing assistance and there was at least an attempt to meet that need by London councils and various housing associations and trusts. Gay men were no longer quite the outsiders in terms of council and charitable housing policy and provision that they had been in previous decades.

The period from the 1960s to the present covered by the coming two chapters is thus marked by a broad developing sense of the particularity

of gay men in relation to home and family. They were a category in council housing equalities policy, and were often deemed to be in special housing need as a result of homelessness and AIDS. They were the subject of specific policies on the part of mortgage lenders, were touted in various forums as leaders in domestic taste, and were gaining visibility as fathers.⁵¹ There was growing insistence on equality even as many gay men sought to mark out their distinction and difference with pride. These imperatives of equality and difference were often entwined and this braced a new politics of gay home-making from the 1970s. Taking up the stories of Brixton squatters, of Ajamu X and of Derek Jarman helps us to see how this played out in localized and particular circumstances.