

Man/Boy Love and the American Gay Movement

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SUMMARY. The issue of man/boy love has intersected the gay movement since the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the first gay rights movement in Germany. In the United States, as the gay movement has retreated from its vision of sexual freedom for all in favor of integration into existing social and political structures, it has sought to marginalize cross-generational love as a “non-gay” issue. The two movements continue to overlap, amid signs of mutual support as well as tension—a state of affairs that also characterizes their interrelationship in other countries. This article offers an overview and analysis of that interrelationship in the United States since the Stonewall Riots in New York City in June 1969, which marked the beginning of a reinvigorated struggle for gay liberation.

“Off the consenting adults bullshit!” So concluded this item in a gay newspaper not long after the June 1969 Stonewall Riots at a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village:

CHICKEN HAWKS NO LONGER IN DUTCH

The Netherlands continues to be one of the most liberal countries in the world. The Dutch government recently introduced a new parliamentary measure that would make most chicken legal. The new legal age for homosexual fun would be set at

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16—the same as for the heteros if the new law passes as expected. Recently, similar legislation was introduced in the Oregon legislature and is expected to be passed into law by 1971. Off the consenting adults bullshit!

The assumptions here reflect the pleasure-affirming impulses of the “Stonewall generation”: Sex is fun, homosexuality is fun, boy-love is fun, gay liberation is a movement for everyone’s sexual liberation. The rebels who fought the police at the Stonewall Inn—teenage youths and drag queens—affirmed the joys of an outlaw sexuality in the face of the outmoded moral norms of the dominant society.

Today, however, the gay movement limits its concerns to what consenting adults do in private. In the era of AIDS, it has de-emphasized sex, and seeks to sanitize the image of homosexuality to facilitate its entrance into the social mainstream. The sexual needs of young people have been devalued in favor of the priorities of an upwardly mobile adult gay middle class (“guppies”—gay urban professionals). In short, the gay movement’s agenda is being determined increasingly by straight society, rather than by homosexuals themselves.

My aim here is to document and summarize incidents that have characterized the interfacing between the U.S. gay movement and the man/boy love issue since Stonewall. Much more could be said, but the incidents discussed here are typical and salient.

IN THE AFTERMATH OF STONEWALL

As the beginning statement of this article demonstrates, man/boy love occasionally intersected the broader gay movement in the years following the Stonewall Riots, even though it was not a major issue.

New York’s Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), successor to the Gay Liberation Front and a prototype activist group founded in December 1969, opposed legal restrictions on sex based on age, although this was never a focus of the group’s activities.² In 1976 GAA became the first gay group in New York—and probably in the country—to sponsor a public forum on man/boy love. Held at the

Church of the Beloved Disciple on April 4, the forum brought together a "panel of pederasts" to speak on the topic "Of Men and Boys: Pederasty and the Age of Consent."

The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Rights Coalition, a cross-Canada group, also favored abolishing the age of consent. Many activists shared the view that the state had no business regulating sex between consenting partners, whatever their age.

Boy-lovers were involved in the gay movement from the beginning, and their presence was tolerated. Gay youth groups encouraged adults to attend their dances. Youth fought to be treated as equal participants in struggle—not as a category of innocents in need of special protection from homosexual seduction, as they are usually regarded today. There was a mood of tolerance, even joy at discovering the myriad lifestyles within the gay and lesbian subculture. "Love is a many-gendered thing," read a banner at a 1971 gay demonstration in Albany, the New York State capital. Still, the issue of sex between adults and minors rarely arose.

MAN/BOY LOVE HITS THE GAY MOVEMENT

In 1977, the issue of sex between adults and minors moved abruptly to center stage. Anita Bryant began to articulate the mounting backlash to gay liberation by zeroing in on a perceived weak link: the widespread belief that gay men seduce young boys and turn them into queers. The name of her organization—Save Our Children—transparently implied this.

Simultaneously, a new hysteria about "kiddie porn" arose, fed by the political right and the feminist movement, with unmistakable suggestions that gay men who loved boys were in reality exploiting and abusing them. This clever propaganda ploy not only deftly exploited the public's ignorance about homosexuality, but also caught the gay movement off guard: It was unprepared to make an intelligent rebuttal. Pederasty was a secret not to be told. Yet although man/boy love represented a minority phenomenon within the gay subculture, it was far from unusual.³

The gay movement went into a defensive mode. "Oh, no, homosexuals don't do *that*. Most child molestation is by heterosexual men against little girls." It didn't occur to gay spokespeople to

draw a distinction between being raped or molested and enjoying sex, or to point out that underage males frequently enjoy and seek to have sex, with men and women. No one thought to ask boy-lovers or boys themselves to respond to the accusation.

The mounting hysteria focused on sex between men and boys. No one expressed concern about women having sex with underage males; after all, that was heterosexual, considered more a peccadillo than a taboo—the woman was performing a social service by introducing the boy to the joys of heterosexuality.

Instead of fighting to liberate youth, it became fashionable to argue that youth needed protection, especially from sex with men. A perversion of language arose, reminiscent of the Newspeak of George Orwell's *1984*, in which "love" really meant "rape." The negative experiences of many females at the hands of straight men aroused skepticism about the ability of boy-lovers to be any different with their boyfriends.

Under pressure from the women's movement and lesbian activists, the gay movement began to internalize straight society's stereotype of pederasty as inherently exploitative, a form of "sexual abuse," even when the youth wanted and enjoyed it. Like society at large, the women's and lesbian/gay movements seemed more concerned about consensual sex between men and boys than about actual physical abuse of children within the family, an epidemic problem. Most activists in these movements, both adult-run, wished the issue of cross-generational sex would just go away. But it didn't.

Boy-lovers began to organize for the first time, in response to two widely publicized incidents in December 1977. Following the arrest of 24 men in Revere, Massachusetts, for consensual sex with boys (mostly teenagers), the Boston-Boise Committee was formed. Its goal was to educate the media and public about the issues involved. A few weeks later, the *Body Politic*, a Canadian gay liberation newspaper, was raided by the police because it had published an article entitled "Men Loving Boys Loving Men."⁴

On December 2, 1978, 150 persons attended a conference on "Man/Boy Love and the Age of Consent" in Boston's Community Church. Initiated by Tom Reeves of the Boston-Boise Committee,

several participants were prominent in the gay and progressive movements, which gave the issue a new urgency. Afterwards, 30 boy-lovers and youth formed their first activist organization, the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). Boy-lovers and gay youth were becoming active protagonists.

The fact that boy-lovers had come out of their closet within a closet immediately embroiled the gay movement in controversy. *Gay Community News*' first 1979 issue published my "Statement to the Gay Liberation Movement on the Issue of Man/Boy Love," which challenged the movement to return to a vision of sexual liberation. It argued that "the ultimate goal of gay liberation is the achievement of sexual freedom for all—not just equal rights for 'lesbians and gay men,' but also freedom of sexual expression for young people and children." It criticized the movement for "limiting itself to a turf restricted to consenting adults" and behaving "as though sex had nothing—or little—to do with our struggle." It urged the movement not to limit its demands "to those thought acceptable to a frightened status quo."⁵

This "manifesto" set off a debate that lasted several months. Much of the lesbian response was hostile and buttressed with arguments like "lesbians don't do that." But a piece by one lesbian feminist stood out for its sensible treatment of a topic heretofore passed over in silence: woman-girl love. Beth Kelly's "On 'Woman/Girl Love'—Or, Lesbians *Do* 'Do It'" noted that the ignorant reactions of many lesbians to man/boy love had helped her to understand "what it could mean to know that your most intensely private moments were nothing more than threads in the widely woven fabric of political experience that enfolds us all." A lifelong lesbian, she acknowledged being involved in cross-generational love "as a girl and as a woman." She described her sexual love for her great-aunt—more than 50 years her senior—when she was between eight and eleven years old. She summarized her journey to self-acceptance:

It has always seemed to me that people know when sex is a right thing for them to be doing, when mutually consented to, regardless of who else may or may not share or understand that

knowledge. It took some hard object lessons before I finally learned how unusual such logic is in this world. Despite the cultural messages to the contrary that I eventually *did* receive, I knew that it was possible for a person to be aware of her own physicalness in a sexual way long before the social timetable of "maturity" says she should be — and to be able to act on her awareness. And I know that now, with all my "grown-up" being. Although for several years I succumbed to social sanctions against lesbian and childhood sexuality, and felt ashamed for having had such experiences, I have come to realize the need to affirm them as part of the rich texture of both human experience in general and my own conscious reality in particular.⁶

Kelly's piece moved me to tears. At last a lesbian activist had challenged the feminist taboo against speaking out about her own experience of cross-generational love in terms other than "rape" or "abuse."

I asked an activist lesbian friend what she thought about Kelly's article. "It was ridiculous," she replied. But how, I protested, could a well-reasoned, clearly authentic and moving article be dismissed so easily? "It was just ridiculous. Lesbians don't do that." Yet this same woman took a friendly interest in my own evolving friendship with a 14-year-old boy. "How's your boyfriend?" she would ask. I misinterpreted these inquiries as signs of support. As long as boy-love remained *entre nous*, everything seemed OK. But when the issue became public, we found ourselves on opposite sides.

It did not occur to gay leaders to defend cross-generational love publicly. They feared that if they did so they would lose their "credibility." But credibility with whom? A gay appointee to New York City's Human Rights Commission, for example, a long-time Democratic activist, told me that I was right on the issue of man/boy love, "but if it ever becomes public, I'll have to oppose you." (To his credit, in subsequent controversies, he was more supportive than his comment implied.)

NEW JERSEY FEMINISTS RETREAT

Besides the debate in *Gay Community News*, the man/boy issue surfaced in 1979 in other ways. In response to lobbying by feminists from the National Organization for Women (NOW) and its Rape Task Force, the New Jersey state legislature had voted to lower the age of consent from 16 to 13 as part of a revision of the state's penal code that also abolished the sodomy statute. The measures were to take effect in the fall. The feminists had argued that the age-of-consent law needlessly stigmatized sexually active youngsters under the age of 16. This sensible stance—never again voiced by any wing of the mainstream U.S. women's movement—aroused the ire of a coalition of mothers, priests, and police, who staged noisy protests in the spring. New Jersey feminists agreed to a “compromise” that would keep the age of consent at 16 but would not criminalize sex between young people so long as the age differential was not greater than four years. Teenagers under 16—who were not consulted in this “compromise”—would still be denied the right to choose lovers in their late teens or older.

THE 1979 MARCH ON WASHINGTON

The man/boy love issue again surfaced early in 1979 at a national conference in Philadelphia which called the historic gay march on Washington, DC, set for October 14. On February 25, the conference adopted the Gay Youth Caucus proposal for a demand urging “Full Rights for Gay Youth, including revision of the age of consent laws.” At a meeting of the group's newly elected National Coordinating Committee, held as soon as the conference had adjourned, lesbians threatened to split (thereby sabotaging the march) unless a substitute for the Gay Youth Caucus demand was adopted. It was.

The substitute—which was drafted by an adult lesbian and subsequently approved by a majority of the delegates in a mail poll (a favorite technique of the trade-union bureaucracy to prevent rank-and-file organization)—read: “Protect Lesbian and Gay Youth from any laws which are used to discriminate against, oppress, and/

or harass them in their homes, schools, jobs and social environments.””

The committee explained its action as a desire “to officially adopt this statement to replace and enlarge the concept of the ‘Revise the Age of Consent’ motion in such a way as we believe to have been the broad meaning and will of the body. . . .” It substituted the concept of “protecting” gay youth, suggesting that they needed to be “protected” from choosing the wrong kind of lovers (i.e., gay men). It served to confuse rape or coercive sex with consensual sex and love. It suggested that age-of-consent laws protect young people from unwanted sex, when in reality they do just the opposite—they punish only sex that *is* consensual, on the grounds that the younger partner is incapable, by virtue of age, of giving consent, even when it is not disputed that consent was given!

I was one of a small minority of delegates who refused to go along with the substitute statement and protested the undemocratic process whereby it was pushed through. The substitute was ageist, I argued, since it was written from an adult’s point of view. Its notion of “protection” “smacks of Anita Bryant and motherhood.” Moreover, “You don’t protect a gay youth by sending his/her older lover to jail and by dragging the young person into Family Court, or worse. . . . Our goal should be sexual freedom, not continued restrictions on consensual sexual activity.”⁸

In March 1979 lesbians in New York’s Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights successfully brought a motion labeling the age-of-consent issue “divisive.” Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL) issued a news release accusing “so-called Man/Boy Lovers” of

attempting to legitimize sex between children and adults by confusing the real needs of Gay youth with a call to *repeal all* age of consent laws. Feminists easily recognize this as the latest attempt to make palatable the sexual exploitation of children.

It called the age-of-consent issue “a diversion,” and put the coalition on record opposing “the sexual abuse of children by heterosexual or homosexual persons”—thereby implying that boy-lovers

were guilty of "sexual abuse." It also sounded a note of censorship:

we will not passively march alongside pederast banners or signs, nor quietly stand and listen to pederast speeches at *any march or rally*. Lesbian Feminist Liberation will not support pederasts within the Lesbian and Gay movements nor anywhere else.⁹

LFL's position suggested hostility to males. It did not go far enough, however, for the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose delegate to the CLGR proposed that the group adopt a formal position "for the protection of male and female children from sexual abuse by adults." He argued that "adults having sex with children is exploitation and is the antithesis of the fight for lesbian and gay rights." He added, "I am not for giving children the right to consent to sex." His motion was overwhelmingly defeated and a substitute passed expressing "opposition to the sexual abuse of children by homosexual or heterosexual people." The SWP thereupon withdrew from the coalition and from the gay movement, and went on to lobby women's groups not to participate in the October march on Washington, in part because the organizers were allegedly "soft" on child exploitation!

The SWP elaborated on its position in an article in its weekly newspaper attacking NAMBLA and the Gay Youth demand in favor of revising age-of-consent laws. The article showed how far a left-wing group could go toward adopting the agenda of the right wing on sexual matters:

The repeal of age-of-consent laws is a reactionary demand, even though its supporters try to pass themselves off as defenders of adolescents against legal victimization.

The campaign around this demand has nothing to do with the totally progressive stance of defending the right of teenagers not to be penalized for their sexual activity. On the contrary, the advocates of repealing age-of-consent laws are primarily adult men who believe they should be unrestricted in having sex with children.

Saying that children have the "right" to "consent" to sex

with adults is exactly like saying children should be able to “consent” to work in a garment factory twelve hours a day.¹⁰

CENSORSHIP AND OSTRACISM

The controversy continued to simmer. On April 1, 1980, following a heated debate, the CLGR decided to call for my removal as a keynote speaker at a gay rights rally on the steps of the state capitol in Albany. Although the effort failed, it did result in most lesbian groups boycotting the demonstration. A half dozen of the most active groups in the coalition resigned.

Later that month, a few lesbians attempted, in vain, to persuade NAMBLA to leave a march in New York City protesting a mobilization the same day by the Christian right wing in Washington, DC. Mark Moffet, a 15-year-old speaker from Gay Youth of New York at the rally in Sheridan Square that ended the march, defended the right of boy-lovers to participate in the movement. He was booed by a claque from NOW—the only time I have seen presumably straight supporters boo a gay speaker at a gay rally.

Two months later, a group calling itself the “Lesbian Caucus—Lesbian & Gay Pride March Committee” tried to split the annual New York City Gay Pride March on June 29. It distributed a leaflet calling on women to split from the march on the false grounds that the organizing committee “has been dominated by the Revolutionary Socialist League, the North American Man/Boy Lovers Association [*sic*] and their supporters.” At the entrance to Central Park, they tried to divert people away from the official rally to a separate event. No address or phone contact appeared on the leaflet.¹¹ A special issue of *Semiotext(e)* on “Loving Boys,” an important contribution to the growing debate, and now an underground classic, was distributed at the march.¹²

NOW threw fuel on the fire in October by adopting a resolution at its national convention condemning pederasty, pornography, sadomasochism and public sex. NOW’s Lesbian Rights Committee, which presented the resolution, argued that these “are not Lesbian and gay civil rights issues” and “have been used to confuse and mislead NOW members, legislators and the public for too long.”

The Lesbian Rights Committee’s accompanying position paper

had a novel definition of pederasty (“the involvement of children by adults in sexual activity”!), and said, incongruously, that “it is well known that over 90% of all pederasts are heterosexual males who seek out young girls as their victims”! It also argued that “Pornography encourages both exploitation and violence whether or not it is heterosexual or homosexual in content.” The authors of this resolution – widely interpreted as an attack on gay men – were clearly uninformed about male homosexuality and man/boy love.

Two statements critical of NOW were circulated by feminist, lesbian and gay activists. One, signed by more than 150 people, said the resolution represented “narrow bigotry promulgated under the rubric of loving concern.” Supporters of it

became allied with reactionary forces which are out to isolate and destroy all those who move beyond conventional boundaries. In giving credence to such ugly stereotypes as the boy-lover as child molester, they bolster and sanction the pathological anxieties of the common culture. . . . Since NOW is perceived to such a great degree as representing the feminist movement, the resolution makes all feminists appear to be advocates of timid respectability who automatically repudiate everything that seems strange and different – and at worst allies, however unwitting, of repressive ignorance and prejudice.¹³

Controversy erupted again in 1981 when the Cornell University gay group, Gay People at Cornell (Gay PAC), invited me to be the keynote speaker at the annual May Gay festival. Over objections from some feminists, Gay PAC voted to reaffirm the invitation, but, following threats of pickets and a boycott of May Gay events by lesbians, withdrew it.

REPRESSION INTENSIFIES

On July 11, 1981, the police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) launched their first attack on NAMBLA, arresting two members and a supporter in New York, and taking several teenage boys into custody. All three men were charged with consensual sex with minors. The arrests, dubbed “Operation Hawk” by the au-

thorities, were accompanied by the usual media hype, which repeated police allegations that child pornography was involved—it was not—and that the home of one of the men was the NAMBLA “headquarters” (it was not).

For the most part, the gay community reacted to the assaults on NAMBLA with diffidence. The gay press covered the busts as news stories. Yet the fact that lovers of youth had been thrust into the forefront of the attacks on gay liberation by the right wing made many activists uneasy—despite the fact that their own pronouncements during the preceding two years had helped to lay the groundwork for state repression of boy-lovers.

A happy exception to this was the forthright support from lesbian sadomasochists, who had suffered similar ostracism and slander from “respectable” elements in the feminist movement.¹⁴

In the summer of 1982, the issue heated up with a “scandal” on Capitol Hill that forced Representative Gerry Studds out of the closet. Studds, a liberal Democrat from a conservative district in Massachusetts, was forced to admit that he had had a sexual encounter with a 17-year-old male page ten years earlier in the District of Columbia (where the age of consent is 16). Had the relationship occurred in a state where the age of consent is higher, he could have received a prison term. (In half the American states, all same-sex sex, regardless of age, is still illegal, and in those where it is legal, the age of consent varies from 14 to 18.) Two years later, Studds was re-elected and became an instant hero to the gay movement—which, relieved that he was not caught with a boy under the age of consent, nevertheless persists in ignoring the pederastic nature of his activity.

In the fall of 1982, NAMBLA’s plan to hold its sixth national conference in Philadelphia’s Lesbian and Gay Community Center ran into opposition. A handful of lesbians and one gay man went to the straight press in an attempt to embarrass the center into rescinding its decision—reaffirmed twice—to rent space to NAMBLA. The conference went ahead as planned—with police surveillance near the entrance to the center. A police spy was ejected for attempting to tape the proceedings.

In December 1982 the FBI and local authorities escalated their harassment and arrested several NAMBLA members whom they

attempted to link to the unexplained disappearance of six-year-old Etan Patz three and a half years earlier. The media spread allegations suggesting that NAMBLA had ties to prostitution, kidnappings, and production and distribution of kiddie porn. NAMBLA called simultaneous news conferences December 28 in New York City and Boston to refute the charges. The next day, the police "found" evidence in their files confirming NAMBLA's version of the events.¹⁵

TUG OF WAR

The fallout from this attempt to smear NAMBLA has continued as a kind of tug of war within the gay community.

On January 6, 1983, the Committee of Lesbian and Gay Male Socialists (CLGMS) sponsored a forum at the New York Marxist School at which I spoke on "Man/Boy Love and Sexual Freedom: What Position for Radicals?" Self-identified Christian terrorists threatened to attack the meeting. The Workers World Party provided a defense guard, and the meeting proceeded without incident.

In a letter to NAMBLA dated February 2, 1983, the gay Catholic group, Dignity, from Region II (New York and New Jersey) said that it had released a statement throughout the Church infrastructure dissociating itself from NAMBLA. The statement, sent to Roman Catholic bishops, diocesan communications offices and newspapers, and other gay religious organizations, charged that NAMBLA "fails to recognize" that "children should be free in their formative years from undue sexual influence of a heterosexual or homosexual nature." The statement, apparently intended to curry favor with the Catholic Church hierarchy (which in 1987 would crack down on Dignity itself, banning it from holding services in Catholic churches), said: "We believe it is imperative to maintain an age of consent in order to exercise one's sexuality in a responsible manner" — as if the role of the state was to ensure "responsible" sex! Dignity did not say what age of consent it supported. (The age in New Jersey is 16; in New York, 17; in Connecticut, 15.)

At its national conference in New York City in August 1985, one resolution

called on Dignity to state that the organization has not, does not, and will not condone the North American Man/Boy Love Association or any organization with similar goals, such as seeking to set aside the age of consent, and fails to recognize the rights of a child to mature as a sexual being!¹⁶

By early 1987, priests in several states had been arrested and charged with having had sex with boys. The Church faced civil lawsuits from irate parents seeking millions of dollars in "damages." Dignity had no words of support for these fellow victims of a Church hierarchy that is probably at least 50% gay.

On February 22, 1983, the Stop the Witchhunt Committee (a group of lesbians and gay men whose aim was to defend NAMBLA in the face of state repression) co-sponsored a forum with New York University's Libertarian Student Association on "An Introduction to the Man/Boy Love Issue." Participants included Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay, his companion John Burnside, Katherine Davenport, and me.

On February 27, the CLGMS sponsored another forum, on "Sexual Liberation, NAMBLA, and the Lesbian and Gay Community," held at the Taller Latinoamericano. On March 5, the New York Council of Lesbian and Gay Organizations, an umbrella group, held a discussion of the recent events, but took no action. On March 17, NYU's Libertarian Student Association held a packed and rowdy forum at the university's Loeb Student Center on "Youth Sexuality: The Case of NAMBLA," with the late Wallace Hamilton and me as speakers. The university's gay group refused to co-sponsor the event.¹⁷

Articles attacking NAMBLA and man/boy love appeared in the New York gay press. They painted NAMBLA as something alien to the gay movement, and opposed its position in favor of decriminalizing all consensual sex. NAMBLA argued that every individual was different, and therefore it was absurd and discriminatory for the state to set an arbitrary age at which sex becomes OK. Implicitly, these articles argued against challenging the state's right to set whatever age of consent it desired. Homosexuals would just have to live with it.

A polemic in the *New York Native* argued that age-of-consent

laws protect children, but did not explain how they accomplish this. Drawing on his own personal experience (“When I was 13, I simply wasn’t ready for full-scale sexual relations.”), the author advised setting the age at 15: “For a year or two, they will have to suffer this denial.”¹⁸ But is it appropriate for gay adults to advise gay 14-year-olds to suffer in abstinence? Does this differ from the arguments of the right wing in favor of abstinence and against contraception?

The March 9, 1983, issue of another gay paper (now defunct), the *New York City News*, carried a three-page attack on NAMBLA by A. Damien Martin, an associate professor of communications at New York University and a director of the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY), which has received funding from the city and state for social services to gay and lesbian youth, and which began operating the city’s first gay high school in 1985. Martin’s article, “The Case Against NAMBLA: Why Are We Ignoring the Obvious?” began with an acknowledgment of the perceived beneficial aspects of his own sexual involvement as a teenager with a manfriend, and noted the “apparent violations of civil rights in the NAMBLA cases, the cynicism of the law enforcement agencies in bringing in the Etan Patz case, and the irresponsibility of the press.” Yet Martin insisted that “NAMBLA is an organization outside the movement with little or no relevance to its goals.”¹⁹

INSIDE OR OUTSIDE?

In 1984 the debate on man/boy love shifted to the West Coast. In San Francisco, efforts to remove NAMBLA from the annual Lesbian/Gay Freedom Day Parade failed, as they had in New York.

NAMBLA’s October 1984 convention in San Francisco’s Pride Center included a public panel discussion on “Man/Boy Love and Sexual Liberation” with Mattachine Society founder Harry Hay; Jim Kepner, curator of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles; Morris Kight, long-time gay rights and social activist from Los Angeles; Jes Harrison, a 16-year-old gay youth; and me. The participation of Hay, Kepner, and Kight was welcome

support from activists whose credentials went back to the beginnings of the U.S. gay movement.

Kepner poignantly observed:

A point I've been trying to make is that if we reject the boy-lovers in our midst today we'd better stop waving the banner of the Ancient Greeks, of Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Oscar Wilde, Walt Whitman, Horatio Alger, and Shakespeare. We'd better stop claiming them as part of our heritage unless we are broadening our concept of what it means to be gay today.²⁰

A few months later, the Board of Elders of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), the largest gay religious denomination, issued a statement condemning "all coercive sexual activity with persons who are helpless in the situation by virtue of age, abilities, dependency or any other circumstance." The Board said that sex between adults and young people "can never be condoned under any circumstances," and characterized such love as "inherently coercive even when it appears on the surface to be voluntary and a product of sexual consent. Informed consent is not possible."²¹ Like Dignity and the state, MCC explained away consent by denying it. "I had two thoughts on this," wrote NAMBLA activist Bob Rhodes.

If the rumor is correct, one or two of the Board of Elders may have a bit of a problem conforming their own conduct to this directive. Further, the National Council of Churches is still not going to let MCC in.²²

In March 1985 the board of directors of New York's Lesbian and Gay Community Center voted unanimously at a closed meeting to deny the local (Horatio Alger) chapter of NAMBLA the right to rent meeting space there. Motivated by fear that NAMBLA's presence would jeopardize fund-raising at a time when the center had applied for grants of \$200,000 from the state and \$150,000 from the city, it also turned down NAMBLA's request to meet with it prior to the vote. The board's action seemed to illustrate Malcolm X's statement: "When they lay those dollars on you, your soul goes." (In

1986, following adoption of a gay civil rights bill by the New York City Council, NAMBLA again applied for the right to rent space in the center. When its request was again denied, it filed a complaint of discrimination against the center with the city's Human Rights Commission. The commission refused to hear the complaint. In the fall of 1989, the center denied space to NAMBLA for a poetry reading by Allen Ginsberg. The board refused to explain its denial.)

In August 1985 NAMBLA's application for membership in New York's Council of Lesbian and Gay Organizations resulted in its being admitted by a close vote. (A subsequent effort to expel it failed.) A couple of months earlier, the International Gay Association had accepted NAMBLA as a member group. The IGA (now known as the International Lesbian and Gay Association) has had a position in favor of abolishing age-of-consent laws since its meeting in Washington, DC, in the fall of 1981, but continues to be of mixed mind about the issue.

In Los Angeles, NAMBLA had participated in Gay Pride marches as part of a contingent opposing U.S. intervention in El Salvador, but in 1985 its application to march as a group in its own right was denied by the business-oriented organizing group, Christopher Street West (CSW).

At the 1986 Los Angeles march, veteran activist Harry Hay, marching with the Radical Faeries (a group he founded), wore a hand-made sign stating, simply, "NAMBLA walks with me." The organizers, apparently apoplectic, summoned mounted police, who surrounded the Faery contingent and threatened to arrest Hay if he did not remove his sign. He refused.²³

CHILD ABUSE HYSTERIA

During the past few years, hysteria about "child sexual abuse" reached new peaks in the United States. The hysteria has heightened the fears of an uninformed public. It has served to soften up public opinion for right-wing attacks on civil liberties and "vice." It may also represent a kind of coup within the "helping professions" by social workers and psychologists anxious to break out of their poor cousin status and, like psychiatrists, promote themselves as indispensable "expert witnesses" in court. Police departments

all over the country are using anatomically "correct" dolls to extract confessions about "bad touching" and "sexual abuse." Child care workers, and even parents, are fearful of false accusations of "child molestation" for showing affection to children, or even changing their diapers.

Millions of milk cartons sport pictures of missing children — the dairy industry's anxiety-inducing message to children that only parents can be trusted. One mother was overheard in a San Francisco supermarket admonishing her child: "If you don't behave, you'll end up on a milk carton!"²⁴ This despite the fact that most missing children have either run away from home or been kidnapped by one of their own estranged parents. The FBI attributes only around 60 or so child disappearances a year to "stranger abduction."

CONCLUSIONS

The U.S. gay movement has made a truce with the state not to challenge the prevailing ages of consent, which vary from state to state. When the state of Wisconsin, for example, decriminalized homosexual sex between adults in 1983, an amendment was added that increased from a misdemeanor to a felony sex between an adult and a teenager 16 or 17 years old! There was no outcry from the gay movement over this attack on the rights of young people.²⁵

This reticence on the part of the gay movement to discuss man/boy love does not, of course, prevent opponents of gay rights from bringing it up themselves. New York's John Cardinal O'Connor, for example, told the press on January 12, 1986, that one reason the New York Archdiocese was opposing a proposed gay rights bill was that "We cannot accept man/boy relationships."²⁶ On this, apparently, Dignity and the Cardinal can agree!

In present-day America it is all right to talk or publish books about boy-love in Ancient Greece or the pederasty of Great Men like Byron. But it is quite another matter to leave the academic ivory tower and acknowledge that boy-love goes on in every neighborhood today.

The gay movement is no longer a protagonist with a long-range vision of sexual freedom and progressive social change. Even the catastrophe of AIDS has brought little recognition from the gay

community of the need for socialized medicine or a national health insurance (and barely audible noises from the moribund left) — despite the fact that the United States is the only “advanced” Western society without such a program. Socialized medicine is the only way to insure effective health delivery to persons with AIDS, whose hospital costs may reach \$150,000 by the time they die.²⁷

History is a pendulum on which things often change into their opposite. Lurches forward and setbacks, not an incremental advance, characterize the struggle for social change. The controversies over boy-love have been around since the beginning of the gay movement a century ago. The fact that they are again being debated demonstrates both the fragility of the gay movement’s achievements before it was wiped out by Hitler and Stalin, and the irrepressibility of aspirations for sexual freedom.

NOTES

1. *San Francisco Free Press*, November 1-14, 1969. The news item appeared on page 3, which was dominated by the head “IN THE STREETS FOR THE REVOLUTION.” Elsewhere in the issue was an ad for a catalogue from D.O.M. offering “the first in young male nude photography.” D.O.M. was a pseudonym for pioneer gay activist Guy Strait, who died in 1987. (See the obituary by John Fish in the *NAMBLA Bulletin*, January-February 1988.)

2. The Preamble to GAA’s constitution demanded “an immediate end to all oppression of homosexuals” and certain “basic rights,” including “THE RIGHT TO LOVE. This is the right to express our feelings in action, the right to make love with anyone, anyway, anytime, provided only that such action be freely chosen by individuals involved.” GAA’s policy, adopted in the early seventies, was “to work for the immediate change in all laws to remove restrictions related to homosexual acts between consenting persons.” The reference to “consenting persons” rather than “consenting adults” was deliberate. The group’s pamphlet *20 Questions about Homosexuality* skirted the question of cross-generational love, stating only that “Homosexuals join heterosexuals in agreeing that young people as well as adults must be protected from *unwanted* sexual advances . . .” (question 17, emphasis added).

3. In their book *Homosexualities*, based on research conducted over the previous decade, Alan P. Bell and Martin S. Weinberg found that 25% of “white homosexual males” and 14% of “black homosexual males” had had as sexual partners boys who were 16 or younger when they themselves were 21 or older (pp. 18 and 311).

4. Gerald Hannon, *Body Politic*, December 1977-January 1978, pp. 29-33.

5. *Gay Community News*, January 6, 1979, p. 5.

6. *Gay Community News*, March 3, 1979, p. 5.
7. Copy in author's files. The poll, dated February 26, 1979, contained several misspelled words, which have been corrected here.
8. Copy in author's files. This statement, dated March 7, 1979, was sent to as many members of the committee as addresses could be found for. Seven years later, a conference in New York City (November 14-16, 1986) to call a second march on Washington the following October adopted as a demand the repeal of "all laws that violate the right to privacy by criminalizing consensual sex *above the sexual age of consent*" (emphasis added). The workshop on demands defeated the following motion: "Government out of the bedroom! No state regulation of sex." By 1986, the U.S. gay movement had become so disoriented by hysteria about youth sexuality that it actually favored government regulation of *consensual* sex—especially if it involved gay men and underage youths!
9. "Man/Boy Lovers—New Group, Old Story." (Emphasis in original.) Copy in author's files.
10. Rich Finkel and Matilde Zimmermann, "The class-struggle road to winning gay rights," *The Militant*, April 13, 1979, p. 25. For an answer to this article, see David Thorstad, "The Socialist Workers Party vs. Gay Liberation (or the Cuckoo Builds a Strange Nest)," in the *Gay Activist* (June-July, 1979) and in *Gay Insurgent* (No. 7, Spring 1981). In contrast to the SWP, two small Trotskyist groups—the Revolutionary Socialist League and the Spartacist League—defended NAMBLA and opposed government interference in any consensual relationship, regardless of the age of the partners.
11. Copy in author's files.
12. *Semiotext(e) Special: Loving Boys*, available for \$1 plus postage from Semiotext(e), 522 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.
13. Both statements are printed in the "sex issue" of *Heresies*, #12 (1981), p. 92.
14. See especially Pat Califia's two-part article "The Age of Consent" in *The Advocate*, October 16 and October 30, 1980; and the two-part interview with Califia and Gayle Rubin defending sexual freedom, man/boy love, and sadomasochism in *Gay Community News*, July 18 and August 15, 1981. See also *Coming to Power* by SAMOIS, the lesbian-feminist S/M organization, first published in 1981, and reprinted by Alyson Publications, Boston, in 1982.
15. This story is told in the book *A Witchhunt Foiled: The FBI vs. NAMBLA*, published by NAMBLA, New York, 1985. Available for \$6.95 (postpaid) from NAMBLA, P.O. Box 174 Midtown Station, New York, NY 10018.
16. "800 Attend 7th Biennial Dignity Convention," *New York Native*, September 30-October 6, 1985, p. 18.
17. The March 17, 1983, issue of the Libertarian Student Association's publication, *Libertarian Broadside*, was devoted to NAMBLA's positions.
18. Charles Jurrist, "Grim Fairy Tales: The World According to NAMBLA," *New York Native*, February 28-March 13, 1983.
19. *New York City News*, March 9, 1983, p. 1. The publisher refused NAMBLA's request for space to reply. In 1981, IPLGY—whose name sounds

like it was designed to look good on grant applications—expelled three members of NAMBLA on the grounds that man/boy love was incompatible with its goals. “We felt from the beginning that NAMBLA’s goals and priorities were antithetical to the needs of gay and lesbian youth,” Martin told the *New York Native* (July 1-14, 1985). He said that his institute tells gay youth that one of their options is to “postpone sex until it can be more satisfying.” This sounds like the advice of the Reagan Administration, whose Adolescent Family Life Program funded 71 projects in 1981 urging teenagers to practice sexual abstinence. Martin was appointed by Governor Mario Cuomo to the New York State Council on Youth Suicide Prevention in the fall of 1985. At the New York City Gay Pride March on June 30, 1985, some of the IPLGY youths broke into a chant of “2, 4, 6, 8—How do you know your wife is straight? 3, 5, 7, 9—Hey, lady, your husband’s mine!” They were quickly shushed up by one of IPLGY’s top men.

20. “Boy-Love Activists Seek Gay Support” by Mark McHarry, *Bay Area Reporter*, October 11, 1984. Hay and Kepner again addressed a NAMBLA conference in Los Angeles on November 7, 1986.

21. *New York Native*, March 25-April 7, 1985, p. 10.

22. “Quid Nunc,” *NAMBLA Bulletin*, May 1985, p. 15.

23. A member of the contingent tore off Hay’s sign, ostensibly to protest the interference with Hay’s right to carry whatever sign he wanted. Hay escaped arrest, but CSW’s attempt to censor a founder of the American gay movement aroused widespread indignation. This did not prevent CSW from formally voting to censure Hay a few weeks later.

24. Private communication to author from a lesbian girl-lover.

25. This “realism” is not new. The boy-love movement in Germany at the beginning of the century arose as part of the new homosexual activism and self-organization, and its trajectory intersected that of the broader gay movement. Boy-lovers were hardly (as A. Damien Martin put it) “outside the movement”—one of the first gay magazines, *Der Eigene*, was inspired by boy-love and anarchism. But then, as now, the two groupings did not always see eye to eye. Some of the issues they confronted are still around today (the nature of same-sex love, sexual liberation or law reform, the age of consent, attitudes toward women’s liberation). On these, boy-lovers had views that differed from those of other homosexuals, as well as from each other. The anarchist boy-lover John Henry Mackay, for example, who wrote under the pen name Sagitta, was indignant at the efforts of Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific Humanitarian Committee to trade off repeal of Paragraph 175, the sodomy statute, for setting an age of consent at 16. “For it has been shown again in these years,” he wrote in the preface to the 1924 edition of his *Buecher der namenlosen Liebe* (Books of the Nameless Love), “that this love has to look for its worst enemies among those who call themselves ‘leaders’ in this fight and have made themselves responsible, in one of their ridiculous and degrading petitions to those currently in power, have publicly advocated an ‘age of consent’—not for children, but for mature boys and youths—and thereby the prosecution and punishment of those whom they know, as no others do, to be just as innocent as themselves, and once again those who love an older

age have sought to save themselves at the cost of the comrades-in-fate of their time—a betrayal of the cause more disgraceful in intention and more dreadful in its result cannot be imagined.” (Quoted in Hubert Kennedy, *Anarchist of Love: The Secret Life of John Henry Mackay*, p. 10.) *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. For a more detailed discussion of these subjects, see my essay “Man/Boy Love Then and Now—A Personal-Political Appraisal” in *NAMBLA Journal* No. 7 (1986).

26. WCBS-TV news report, January 12, 1986, 6:30 p.m.

27. NAMBLA is one of the few gay groups to address the subject. On January 11, 1986, its Steering Committee adopted an official position on AIDS that included a demand for “Free health care for persons with AIDS.” By early 1989, New York City’s AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was advancing the slogan “Health Care is a Right,” which implicitly points to the need for a national health care program.

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