

Class and the LGBT lobby

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It is today taken as almost axiomatic that the left supports the LGTB cause. It came therefore, as a surprise to me to find a communist journalist Gearoid O Colmain arguing (<https://ahtribune.com/history/1027-homo-sovieticus.html>) that homosexuals, far from constituting a persecuted minority, are in fact key protagonists of the ruling class and bourgeois ideology.

He claims that

In the Soviet Union homosexuality was seen as one of the many perversions promoted by the bourgeoisie and their petty-bourgeois opponents— a ruling class phenomenon of social rather than biological origin. The communist understanding of sexuality has, since the counter-revolutions in Europe in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR, been conveniently buried and forgotten.

My impression of his arguments is that they are very mixed with some stuff that is plausible and some stuff that is cranky, denying that HIV causes AIDS for example. But I think that a plausible economic argument can be made for one of his key arguments - that the political gay movement expresses middle class and upper class interests. I will in this post try to pull together an argument to this effect. I will focus on the mean class position of homosexual men, and show that this puts them in the top 10% of the population, and that this economic position is not incidental, but is closely connected with the gay mode of life.

1 Class

How do you define class position in Marxist terms? At its most basic the distinction between exploiting and exploited classes rests on whether a person receives goods and services involving more labour than they contribute to society. This is a general definition that applies across all class societies, slave, feudal or capitalist. If you get back more than you put in in terms of labour then you, at least partially, benefit from exploitation.

It is important to realise that whether someone benefits from exploitation is down to the legal form of their income. A person may formally be an employee and still benefit from exploitation. Obviously this applies to a manager on £250,000 a year. It is not always so evident where the cutoff comes. To work

it out precisely you have to know what the monetary equivalent of an hour of labour is. I have not worked this out recently for the UK but before the recession I reckoned that it was about £20 an hour. As a first estimate anyone earning more than this in say 2008 would have been, at least partially, benefiting from the exploitation of others.

Just taking wage income into account is obviously too simple. People may have property income as well, and on the negative side they may be exploited by banks to whom they pay interest, or landlords to whom they pay rent. But simple income figures give you a first cut.

An alternative approach is to look at the share of wages in national income, then look at the mean wage. Someone on the mean wage will be exploited by the average amount. In 2009 for example the UK wage share was 53%¹ and the average salary was £26,450² which implies that the average employee generated a surplus value of £23,450 giving a total value created per employee of just under £50,000, so anyone earning above this was not exploited.

Because the distribution of income is uneven, the mean wage in 2009 was well above the median adult income which was only £16,400, and 67% of adults had an income of less than the average wage. About the top 10% of Britons, that year, had an income above the exploitation threshold of £50,000.

What does it mean to say someone is middle class?

Was a person on the median income of £16,000 - in the middle of the income range middle class?

In strict statistical terms it might seem so, but socially that makes no sense. A middle class status used to be associated with the self employed professions or small business people, who were not exploited, nor were they employers of labour. In terms of the current income distribution that would be people earning around the exploitation threshold say in the range £45,000 to £73,000, above which a person was receiving the value they create, plus the surplus value created by an average worker. Above that level they can reasonably be said to be upper class.

This comprised roughly the distribution from the 88th to the 96th percentile of the UK income distribution, or 8% of the population. If you are in the top 10% of the population then you are either comfortably middle class or upper class.

2 Economics and the gay lobby

You might initially think that economic class position had nothing to do with homosexuality, but it does not take long looking at the empirical sociological literature to come to the conclusion that this is mistaken. There is a connection, but it is that the interests of gays tend to be aligned with that of the propertied classes, rather than being independent of conflicting class interests. First, the literature on class attitudes to homosexuality shows that working

¹From Extended Penn World Tables

²See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/datasets/agegroupas>

Table 1: US Family size by category, calculated from Black et al. [2000, table 11].

children	gay couple	married	unmarried	lesbian couple	men single	women single
		hetero couple	hetero couple			
0	0.948	0.408	0.638	0.783	0.952	0.77
1	0.03	0.224	0.181	0.126	0.029	0.101
2	0.012	0.23	0.11	0.05	0.014	0.076
3	0.011	0.138	0.071	0.04	0.005	0.045
total	0.087	1.098	0.614	0.346	0.072	0.388
family size	2.087	3.098	2.614	2.346	1.072	1.388

class people are more likely to be hostile to it, and people from higher social classes more likely to be favourable or tolerant towards it Andersen and Fetner [2008], Embrick et al. [2007]. Second, published data shows that gay couples are, on average, significantly better off than straight ones. On both attitudinal grounds and economic grounds therefore, the gay straight polarisation axis, rather than being independent of the class polarisation axis turns out to be tilted with respect to it.

There is a large body of data establishing that the gay population is disproportionately drawn from the middle and upper middle class, with, as a result, disproportionately small proportion being working class. In the UK a study showed that whereas only 16% of men had university degrees, 36% of gays had them Arabsheibani et al. [2005]. Where only 5.5% of all men had professional or managerial jobs, the proportion among gay men in the UK was 9%. For the USA, where educational opportunities have traditionally been better than the UK, a study of couples showed that 43% of gays and lesbians had college degrees, whereas only 28% of straight men and 26% of straight women had such degrees Black et al. [2007]. Similar results come from Berg and Lien [2002], Billy et al. [1993]. Given this difference in jobs and education, one would expect that there would be a significant economic disparity between the position of gay and straight families. This is indeed what we find.

A large Swedish survey of 1,029,420 heterosexual and 940 gay and 968 lesbian couples found that gay couples had the highest incomes Ahmed et al. [2011]. They show that gay couples earn more than heterosexual couples who in turn earn more than lesbian ones. This is unsurprising since male earnings are pretty consistently higher than female ones, so an all male household would be expected to earn the most and an all female one the least. No attempt is made in this survey to compute the per-capita incomes of different household types, i.e., to take into account non-earning dependents, principally children, but also potentially older relatives. To do this one would have to know the average family size for different households.

Black et al Black et al. [2000] give data on the proportion of heterosexual and homosexual couples with 1,2,or 3 or more children in their households, though this is for the USA not Sweden. Nonetheless, it is possible to use their data to compute the mean household sizes for different types of couples (Table 1).

Table 2: Comparison of median hourly wages of gay and heterosexual individuals in the UK, year 2000. From Arabsheibani et al. [2005]. Note that the figures in both cases are for cohabiting couples.

	Same sex	Heterosexual married
Men	£10.10	£8.90
Women	£8.70	£6.20

Table 3: Estimate of percapita incomes in gay and straight couples in the UK. Mean pay rates and activity rates from Arabsheibani et al. [2005], family size estimates derived from Black et al. [2000].

	Gays	Lesbians	Married men	Married women
Mean pay rate	£11.70	£10.10	£10.70	£7.60
Activity rate	0.87	0.85	0.84	0.71
Product	£10.18	£8.58	£8.99	£5.40
Per couple	£20.36	£17.17	£14.38	£14.38
Scaled by family size				
Per capita hourly income	£9.75	£7.32	£4.64	£4.64

Arabsheibani et al. [2005] produces data for hourly rates of pay for men and women in the UK who are in either gay couples or married heterosexual couples. This broadly reproduces the results of Ahmed, Andersson and Hammarstedt for Sweden, in that he showed that the median wage of gay men in couples was higher than that of heterosexual married men, which in turn was slightly above that of lesbian women, who in turn earned more than married heterosexual women (Table 2). He does not estimate incomes of couples. This can not be done just by adding the hourly wage rates of married men and women, firstly because of the lower employment rate of married women 71% against 85% for women in Lesbian couples and 87.5% for men in gay couples, and secondly because married women have lower working hours. However if we did simply add the mean hourly pay of the married men and women scaled by activity rates and divide by an estimated family size we can get the an estimate of mean hourly pay per family member. Table 3 gives such an estimate for the UK and Table 4 corresponding estimates for Sweden. Both these tables depend on the use of family size estimates derived from Black et al. We can expect the relative family sizes of gay, lesbian and heterosexual married couples to be similar accross countries at comparable stages of development. Although the exact divisors that should be used will vary from country to country, the ordering that we obtain of per capita income as being gay couples \succ lesbian couples \succ heterosexual couples will be robust.

Table 4: Incomes of Gay, Lesbian and Heterosexual couples in Sweden.

Type of couple	Gay	Lesbian	Heterosexual
Mean income of couple SEKAhmed et al. [2011]	584,000	464,000	532,000
Per capita adjusted for family size Black et al. [2000]	280,000	197,000	190,000

For example we can derive figures for per-capita income for gay, lesbian and straight couples in the US from the data in Black et al. [2007] giving the same ordering. Again the per capita income of gay male couples is highest, followed by lesbian couples, followed by heterosexual couples (Table 5).

The figures for the UK in Table 3 show a two to one advantage in per capita incomes for gay as opposed to straight couples. If we combine this with Arabshehani's figures for the distribution of wages by deciles, we see that this means that the median gay income is as high as the top decile of heterosexual family incomes. Only the top 10% of straight families are as well off as a mid income range gay couple. This amounts to an appreciable socio economic class difference.

2.1 Unpaid social labour by couples

But the analysis so far has only dealt with the market economy and earnings obtained there. The family is also a place where work is done, the domestic economy. Indeed this is the original meaning of economy, management of the household. This work does not assume monetary form, either because it is entirely private : a person cooking their own meal, or because, although it is social : looking after children, it occurs under non-capitalist relations of production. Even the 'private' work of a person feeding themselves, is in a sense socially necessary labour, since, absent such cooking, the population would starve. But shopping, cooking, cleaning up, washing are all activities that take place whether the household has children or not and are thus not relevant in the comparison of different household types. On the other hand child care time will vary according to whether the household has children and depend also on the number of children they have. Since much of our data has come from North America let us look there. Statistics Canada give figures which show that in the average family with children the mother spends 2.55 hrs a day in childcare and the father 1.55 hours a day, to give a total per couple of 4.1 hours. On the assumption that Canadian and US household time budgets are similar we have computed the expected number of hours of childcare time in different categories of family, weighting 4.1 hrs a day by the probability that the household has children (Table 5).

From this we see that straight couples perform much more unpaid socially necessary labour time. But how much is this labour worth. One approach taken in Colman and Atlantic [1998] was to value childcare labour at the rate of pay of childminders in private childcare businesses. From the standpoint of Marxist economics this is wrong, since that confuses the value of labour power with the value created by labour and from the standpoint of orthodox economics it also underestimates the impact of withdrawing this much labour from the market economy. Workers are only paid a fraction of the value they create, so valuing unpaid labour at the prevailing wage rate is a serious underestimate of the value that that labour would have created were it deployed in the market sector. It amounts to the assumption that there would be no additional property income were the effective labour force to increase. Adding the equivalent of

Table 5: Estimates of gay, lesbian and straight couples incomes and contributions of unpaid labour for the US 2007. Incomes derived from Table 5 in Black et al. [2007], and family size is derived from Table 2 in the same paper. Bourgeois valuation of unpaid labour follows the valuation of Colman and Atlantic [1998] and is in 1998 \$Can. Hours per year unpaid Socially Necessary Labour Time (SNLT) derived from figures for daily childcare by men and women couples in Canada [2011] weighted by the probability that a given family type has children (Table 1).

	Gay	Lesbian	Straight
Mean couple income	\$82,000	\$66,500	\$65700
Mean family size	2.144	2.356	3.173
Per capita income	\$38259	\$28234	\$20700
Unpaid SNLT hrs/yr	74	329	882
Bourgeois value	\$567	\$2495	\$6692
Marxian valuation	\$2324	\$10229	\$27433
Derivation of Marxian valuation			
US percapita GNP 2007			\$46000
Participation rate			63%
GNP per participant			\$73000
Paid working week, hours			47
Hours per year			2350
Value created per hour of labour			\$31

millions of additional full time workers to the market economy would generate additional value flows that would filter through to profit, interest, tax revenues etc.

A better procedure is to estimate the monetary equivalent of social labour time, as is done in the subsidiary table. This gives a figure of about \$31 value created per hour by US labour in 2007. Scaling the unpaid childcare labour in families by this gives the bottom line of Table 5. We see that whereas the average gay couple did unpaid social labour with a value of about \$2300 a year, the average straight couple did unpaid social labour to a value of over \$27000 a year, more than 10 times as much. Of that labour about \$17000 worth is done by the mother and \$10000 worth by the father.

It could be argued that this is an unfair comparison; that having children is a private decision and it is nobody else's business if a gay couple do not want to have children. Why should they work to create labour power for the capitalist system?

The reality is that having children is, in part, a private decision although social expectations play a huge role in the decision. However, things can be simultaneously private and social. Commodity production rests on this kind of duality: commodities are produced by private individuals and firms, but they are produced to meet social needs. Children are produced as a result of private actions but once they are grown up, they constitute the future society, and via their work, support that society. A person who, due to choice or circumstances, has no offspring, depends for their day to day existence on the offspring of others. It may appear that by saving for their old age they have provided for themselves.

But this is a monetary illusion. You do not save for your old age by putting cans of beans and sacks of flour in a cellar to sustain you; instead you rely on freshly produced food, clothes etc, produced by the labour of the generation that follows you. If you rely on a state pension then the next generation will be taxed to support you. If you have a private pension it will be invested in government bonds to produce interest. That interest will again come from tomorrow's tax payers. If it is invested in shares, then the pension will come from the employment of tomorrow's workers.

The unpaid labour of raising children, labour predominantly done by mothers, is socially essential and all the current generation, whether they have children themselves or not, benefit indirectly from it. Gay activists are wont to identify their campaigns with campaigns against women's oppression, but the economic analysis so far shows that this concept is fallacious. Not only are gay couples financially better off, they also, in the main, often opt out of the socially necessary unpaid labour that is at the root of the disadvantaged position of women/wives. The establishment and normalisation of gay marriage will tend to increase the inequality of men and women in this respect. Insofar as a portion of the male population were once covert homosexuals, who would have hidden their preferences, married women and helped to bring up children, they can now move directly into a respectable gay marriage where they are statistically very unlikely to do any unpaid child raising work. The net effect is obviously to accentuate the disparity between men and women, and shift even more of the burden of raising the next generation onto women.

The economic basis of marriage is not love. As both experience and the tradition of romantic literature tell us, you do not need to be married to love, and many marriages continue despite an absence of love. The legal institution of marriage regulates, on the one hand, rights and duties with respect to children, and on the other, the sharing of various juridical assets. These include both direct ownership of dwellings, instances where there are heritable tenancies, and personal rights to other public and private benefits: pensions, insurance, citizenship. In the early stages after the legalisation of homosexuality, gays were relatively uninterested in marriage, and, if anything, disdained it as a mark of respectability.

Two processes operating over the last decades may have made the juridical asset aspect of marriage more attractive. The first of these is just the cumulative result of the economic advantage that gay couples enjoy. It enables them to accumulate property faster than other couples, so they have more to share on the death of a partner. Gays are twice as likely to own dwellings in the highest property band as heterosexuals. Black *et al.*, showed that over 34% of middle-aged gays owned houses in the highest property band as against under 16% of married men and women of the same age. We have been unable to find statistics on ownership of financial assets, but one would expect, from the big income disparity, to find a similar bias there. At the same time, the advance of privatisation, neo-liberalism and the undermining of universal health and social benefits increases the importance of heritable or shareable private insurance rights.

“Couples seeking to protect their relationship and family through wills and other mechanisms in the absence of a marriage contract need significant resources, including knowledge and money. This is equally the case in the dissolution of a relationship not recognised by the state, where only those with these same resources can pursue an equitable distribution of joint assets.” Bhroin [2009]

The conclusion from the evidence so far is that the gay marriage movement is fundamentally conservative, aimed at the securing of relatively privileged property ownership and it makes the relative position of women in society slightly worse³. The economic effects are small since the affected population segment is tiny, but the debate on gay marriage takes on a prominence way beyond any direct socioeconomic effect that it may have.

	Reproductive	Semi-reproductive	Non-reproductive
Atomised	nuclear family	lesbian couple	gay couple
Semi-communal	extended family		
Communal	phalanstery/kibbutz		nunnery/monastery

Table 6: Family forms on two axes.

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³“In short, the secret history of gay marriage is that its real history, as a rapacious, greedy, and entirely selfish campaign carried out by rapacious, greedy and entirely selfish gay men and women has been systematically erased by gay men like Frank Bruni and their unctuous straight allies like Frank Rich and Linda Hirshman. The secret history of gay marriage is not that it might prevent our sex lives from being more interesting, but that its victory enables the cementing of a neo-liberal society where only private relationships can ensure access to economic security and healthcare. The preferred narrative is that gay marriage will be a dream come true. The reality is that gay marriage is nothing but a nightmare and neo-liberalism’s handiest little tool.” [Nair, 2015]

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