

POP MATTERS

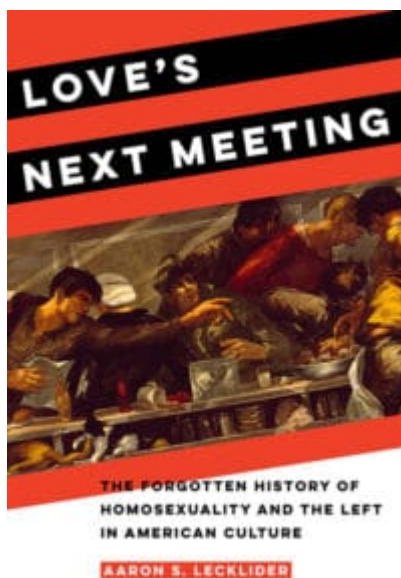


Edward Melcarth, Last Supper, ca. 1960, The Forbes Collection | From the cover of *Love's Next Meeting*

Lecklider's Historical Work *Love's Next Meeting* Examines Homosexuals and Communism in the US

In the virulently anti-Communist and homophobic climate of the postwar era many feared any association between the emerging lesbian and gay cause and Communism.

By [George de Stefano](#) / 14 July 2021



Love's Next Meeting: The Forgotten History of Homosexuality and the Left in American Culture
Aaron Lecklider

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Love's Next Meeting: The Forgotten History of Homosexuality and the Left in American Culture, is nothing less than revelatory. Aaron S. Lecklider's historical account of a relationship that, as Lecklider observes, has "never been easy" also has great personal relevance for me, a gay man and lifelong leftist.

Before coming out, I had been an activist in various leftist causes, beginning with the anti-Vietnam war movement when I was barely a teenager. I'd been introduced to leftist ideas by my grandfather, a Sicilian-born communist who, as my father observed, kept getting fired because "he was always trying to organize the workers against the bosses." My mother, his daughter, was proud of her father. When I brought home a Sicilian friend for dinner one Christmas, she said to him, "You know, my father was a communist." But she worried that I, like him, would suffer for my political beliefs.

After coming out, my political activity as an activist and journalist often entailed bringing lesbian and gay liberationist perspectives to the broader Left and advocating leftist politics within the lesbian and gay movement. In the early '80s, I joined an organization my partner helped found—the Committee of Lesbian and Gay Male Socialists (CLGMS). The New York City-based group's members, some of whom had been members of Marxist organizations, strove to achieve that crossover.

Several members had left their parties and other organizations because they found them to be lukewarm at best, downright hostile at worst, toward sexual politics. Young radicals of the 21st century take for granted that sexuality and gender belong on left-wing agendas. But as late as the '90s, some straight leftists still considered homosexuality "bourgeois decadence" or a "secondary contradiction". A now-defunct but once-leading Marxist paper I wrote for refused to allow the term "lesbian and gay liberation" because people have "different ideas about what liberation means," a transparent dodge. The paper's editorial collective was much more comfortable with the less-radical nouns "rights" or "struggle".

When we brought our CLGMS signs and banners to leftist demonstrations, we encountered responses like, "why do you people have to bring sex into everything?" At a pro-labor demonstration in Washington, D.C, several of our members were menaced by drunk straight men until someone told them, "Leave them alone, they're union." In 1983, the inclusion of a gay or lesbian speaker at a rally commemorating the historic 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom became a major controversy. The Black lesbian poet [Audre Lorde](#) was eventually added as a speaker. As she delivered her powerful, uncompromising speech, loud, angry boos erupted from parts of the crowd.

It would be up to lesbian and gay leftists to theorize how homosexuality connected with traditional concerns of Left analysis and politics: class and class struggle, capitalism, and state repression. That work paid off: intersectionality, whatever its theoretical shortcomings, has provided a framework for integrating what had been seen as discrete issues.

Gay and lesbian leftists of my generation weren't the first to grapple with these questions. As Lecklider shows, through a combination of meticulous archival research and astute, often surprising analysis, in the decades before Stonewall, homosexual and gender nonconforming men and women were fighting for liberation through involvement with the Left, which in this account, is mainly the Communist Party, the largest and most significant leftist organization. They took part in radical labor organizing, joined the fight against Fascism in the Spanish Civil War, opposed racism, sexism, and state and police repression. They were intersectional *avant la lettre*.

Lecklider's book "reconsiders the relationship between radical anticapitalism and homosexuality in the United States," which often has been portrayed in mainly negative terms, as one of "misgivings, betrayals, dismal disappointments, and interpretive dead ends." Lecklider, though not overlooking "the failures of the Left to build a cultural movement centralizing sexual dissidence as a political concern," explores "a counterhistory where possibility, visibility, and resistance converged at the intersection of homosexuality and the Left."

However, writing that counterhistory faced daunting obstacles: "overly simplified" accounts of homosexuality and the Left reflect the impact of "sexual conservatism and anti-Communism." "The powerful effect of a century's worth of red scares, state-sponsored repression, cultural opprobrium, moral condemnation, police harassment, and FBI surveillance would be hard to overcome," Lecklider notes. "These forces have further restricted the availability of sources documenting this history, providing a significant stumbling block to historians attempting to write about it."

The fact, however, that there exists no "central repository" holding materials documenting pre-Stonewall connections between the Left and homosexuality exists doesn't mean there is no evidence of such a relationship. "Cultural works such as novels, poems, autobiographies, and short fiction reveal unique aspects of the Left that were central to participants but not necessarily found in the official records of the Communist Party ... It is within cultural spaces that homosexuality was most visible." These include speakeasies, nightclubs, cabarets, "bohemian spaces" like certain clubs and private parties, parks, working-class and "transient" ("hobo") communities, and political organizations.

"Cafeterias, urban parks, boxcars, prisons, working-class bars, skid rows and slums" also were "spaces where both Communists and homosexuals could be found."

Lecklider focuses on "the cultural logic that linked sexual dissidents with radical working-class politics in ways that challenge the homo/hetero binary." For example, when discussing male sex work, leftists focused more on the work than on the sex.

One myth that Lecklider demolishes is that the Marxist Left was prudish and sexually repressed. On the contrary, "the transgressive dimensions of Communism defied not only puritanical expectations of sexual propriety among women but also gender normativity..." In the '20s and '30s, many US radicals were attracted to the Soviet Union and Communism because both offered an alternative to repressive bourgeois morality. The Soviet Union early on decriminalized homosexuality (only to recriminalize it under Stalin); women's equality in domestic and public

spheres was official policy. Conservatives accurately perceived the radical Left as an environment in which non-monogamous and non-heterosexual sexuality flourished. In the Communist Party of the 1930s, sex was, as Lecklider observes, “profligate”.

Still, Lecklider’s characterization of the Left-homosexual relationship as “never easy” must be kept in mind. Some Communists and fellow travelers indeed were hostile to nonnormative sexuality and gender expression. They expressed their antipathy in prominent Left publications like [New Masses](#). Communist cartoonists depicted workers as rugged, no-nonsense heterosexuals; if male, members of the bourgeoisie were portrayed as effeminate; if women, as fashion-obsessed and consumerist airheads.

As my and my comrades’ experience in CLGMS demonstrated, anti-gay attitudes persisted among radical leftists and communists even after Stonewall and the founding in 1969 of the [Gay Liberation Front](#) (GLF), which “connected gay liberation with ongoing battles against racial, gender, and class inequality.” But by then, and continuing into subsequent decades, “the historical intersection of homosexuality and the Left” had been obscured, forgotten, and “largely dismissed as anti-Communist hysteria.”

Why did pre-Stonewall men and women turn to radical politics? “The impossibility of assimilating into mainstream American society primed many gay women and men to reject mainstream politics in favor of radical liberation,” writes Lecklider. Like revolutionary politics, homosexuality “was associated with a similar refusal to submit to American norms, creating a discursive overlap between sexual dissidents and leftists that blurred the line separating one group from the other.”

Lecklider’s account comprises eight chapters that explore the experiences of “sexual dissidents” on the Left. He explores how leftists conceived sexual politics; depictions of homosexuality in radical literature and publications like *New Masses* in the 1920s and 1930s; the experiences of three constituencies that leftists worked to organize (workers, women, the urban poor); and race and gender politics. The book’s last two chapters—the best, in my opinion—focus on two “seismic historical shifts” crucial to the Left and leftist homosexuals: the war against fascism and the Cold War.

Regarding the former, Lecklider analyzes the impact of the Communist movement’s turn from advocating the overthrow of capitalism to the [Popular Front](#) era, with its emphasis on uniting “democratic” forces in a broad anti-Fascist movement that prioritized defeating the global threat posed by Hitler and Mussolini. During the Popular Front era, “Leftist discourse moved closer to the center of American politics as the Communist Party responded to a global crisis by positioning Communism as 100 percent Americanism.”

Documenting the radical commitments of earlier generations of homosexual men and women leads Lecklider to critique post-WWII homophile and gay rights organizing. Organizations such as the [Mattachine Society](#) were founded by leftists, including Communist Party members. But they were pushed out by more conservative members who sought not revolution but assimilation.

In the virulently anti-Communist and homophobic climate of the postwar era, with Republican Senator Eugene McCarthy leading a crusade that was both anti-Left and anti-homosexual, many feared any association between the emerging gay cause and Communism. And it wasn't only reactionaries for whom Communism and homosexuality represented a dual-threat. The liberal Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. inveighed against both in his dreary but influential book, [The Vital Center](#).

As Lecklider points out, the "Cold War targeting of both homosexuals and Communists was not...an entirely irrational coupling." Rather, "it responded to the very real—and legitimately overlapping—threats each group posted to the dominant social order of the postwar United States."

But in the 1950s, Mattachine and the lesbian-oriented [Daughters of Bilitis](#) eschewed revolution and fundamentally changing US society in favor of seeking full admission to it. Given the forces arrayed against them, the adoption of an assimilationist agenda is understandable. Still, it had negative consequences, including the alienation of gay and lesbian people for whom sexuality wasn't the sole or dominant concern, mainly African Americans and women. Rather than expand the movement, the turn to the right limited its prospects.

Lecklider aims to "demystify the attraction of the Left for many sexual dissidents" while capturing the complexity of the relationship between the radical Left and homosexuality before sexual liberation. He introduces us to a varied and fascinating cast of characters. There are literary critic [John Malcolm Brinnin](#) and his lover, the poet [Kimon Friar](#) (Lecklider's book takes its title from one of Brinnin's poems).

Journalists and activists [Grace Hutchins](#) and [Anna Rochester](#) traveled together as a couple to Russia in 1927, the year they both joined the Communist Party. [Edward Dahlberg](#), a gay writer close to the Communist Party but not an actual member (what used to be called a "fellow traveler"), wrote the first novel warning about the Third Reich, *Those Who Perish* (1933). [V.F. Calverton](#), a writer and editor, explored "the role of sex radicalism in leftist politics."

[John Pittman](#), the editor of a "Communist-leaning" Black newspaper in San Francisco, editorialized forcefully and repeatedly against anti-homosexual prejudice. Willard Motley, a Black gay leftist writer whose novel [Knock on Any Door](#) (1947), a major commercial success, was turned into a [hit film](#) directed by Nicholas Ray and starring Humphrey Bogart. (Unfortunately, the gay content was drastically pared down in the published novel and excised entirely from the film).

[Jim Kepner](#) was a Communist Party member who became one of the leading early gay rights activists as a member of the Mattachine Society and a founder of ONE, Inc. [H.T. Tsiang](#), a Chinese-American writer and actor whose formally experimental, sexed-up, and campy novel, *The Hanging on Union Square* (1935), was a "proletarian burlesque" that "interweaves sexual desire, working-class amusements, and mass culture." [Jo Sinclair](#), a Jewish lesbian, wrote the popular "proletarian butch" novel, *Wasteland* (1945).

When Lecklider is good, he's outstanding. He possesses a thorough knowledge of US Left history, especially that of the Communist Party. (If you're confused about what "Third Period" Communism was, Lecklider explains it succinctly.) He's made excellent use of his archival materials. His interpretations of his findings are original and provocative, if at times debatable.

Sometimes, though, his academic language—Lecklider is an associate professor of American Studies—comes off as stilted and opaque: "The poet's act of transubstantiation, where poetry both stands in for and articulates queer sexual performance, presents a scene in which the performance, narration, and formal innovation are symptomatic of the same sexual economy."

This is unfortunate because most of the time his writing is clear, direct, and even poetic. Riffing on his book's title, Lecklider writes, "Love's next meeting could have meant many things"— "a meeting of lovers, or strangers, or comrades." "It might have been a singular affair, or a weekly commitment ... Love's next meeting might have been held in a smoky room where radicals plotted their revolution, or it might have occurred in the shadows of a park under the cover of trees that ensured none could bear witness ... Love's next meeting, wherever and whenever it occurred, possessed the power to change the world."