

DISMANTLING HIERARCHY, QUEERING SOCIETY

by **Andrea Smith**

Tikkun Magazine, July/August 2010

<http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/dismantling-hierarchy-queering-society>

Queer politics calls us to go beyond a simple toleration for gay and lesbian communities to address how heteropatriarchy structures white supremacy, capitalism, and settler colonialism. By heteropatriarchy, I mean the way our society is fundamentally based on male dominance—a dominance inherently built on a gender binary system that presumes heterosexuality as a social norm.

To examine how heteropatriarchy is the building block of U.S. empire, we can turn to the writings of the Christian Right. For example, Prison Fellowship founder Charles Colson makes a connection between homosexuality and the nation-state in his analysis of the war on terror, claiming that one of the causes of terrorism is same-sex marriage:

Marriage is the traditional building block of human society, intended both to unite couples and bring children into the world ... There is a natural moral order for the family ... The family, led by a married mother and father, is the best available structure for both child-rearing and cultural health. Marriage is not a private institution designed solely for the individual gratification of its participants. If we fail to enact a Federal Marriage Amendment, we can expect not just more family breakdown, but also more criminals behind bars and more chaos in our streets. It's like handing moral weapons of mass destruction to those who would use America's depravity to recruit more snipers, more hijackers, and more suicide bombers.

When radical Islamists see American women abusing Muslim men, as they did in the Abu Ghraib prison, and when they see news coverage of same-sex couples being "married" in U.S. towns, we make our kind of freedom abhorrent—the kind they see as a blot on Allah's creation. [We must preserve traditional marriage in order to] protect the United States from those who would use our depravity to destroy us.

The implicit assumption in this analysis is that the traditional heterosexual family is the building block of empire. Colson is linking the well-being of U.S. empire to the well-being of the heteropatriarchal family.

Heteropatriarchy is the logic that makes social hierarchy seem natural. Just as the patriarchy rule the family, the elites of the nation-state rule their citizens. For instance, prior to colonization many Native communities were not only nonpatriarchal, they were not socially hierarchical, generally speaking. Consequently, when colonists first came to this land they saw the necessity of instilling patriarchy in Native communities because they realized that indigenous peoples would not accept colonial domination if their own indigenous societies were not structured on the basis of social hierarchy.

Patriarchy in turn rests on a gender-binary system; hence it is not a coincidence that colonizers also targeted indigenous peoples who did not fit within this binary model. Many Native communities had multiple genders—some Native scholars are now even arguing that their

communities may not have been gendered at all prior to colonization—although gender systems among Native communities varied.

Gender violence is a primary tool of colonialism and white supremacy. Colonizers did not just kill off indigenous peoples in this land—Native massacres were also accompanied by sexual mutilation and rape. The goal of colonialism is not just to kill colonized peoples—it's also to destroy their sense of being people. It is through sexual violence that a colonizing group attempts to render a colonized people as inherently rapable, their lands inherently invadable, and their resources inherently extractable. A queer analytic highlights the fact that colonialism operates through patriarchy.

Another reality that a queer activist approach reveals is that even social justice groups often rely on a politics of normalization. Queer politics has expanded our understanding of identity politics by not presuming fixed categories of people, but rather looking at how these identity categories can normalize who is acceptable and who is unacceptable, even within social justice movements. It has also demonstrated that many peoples can become "queered" in our society—that is, regardless of sexual/gender identity, they can become marked as inherently perverse and hence unworthy of social concern (such as sex workers, prisoners, "terrorists," etc.). We often organize around those peoples who seem most "normal" or acceptable to the mainstream. Or we engage in an identity politics that is based on a vision of racial, cultural, or political purity that sidelines all those who deviate from the revolutionary "norm."

Because we have not challenged our society's sexist hierarchy (which, as I have explained, fundamentally privileges maleness and presumes heterosexuality), we have deeply internalized the notion that social hierarchy is natural and inevitable, thus undermining our ability to create movements for social change that do not replicate the structures of domination that we seek to eradicate. Whether it is the neocolonial middle managers of the nonprofit industrial complex or the revolutionary vanguard elite, the assumption is that patriarchs of any gender are required to manage and police the revolutionary family. Any liberation struggle that does not challenge heteronormativity cannot substantially challenge colonialism or white supremacy. Rather, as political scientist Cathy Cohen contends, such struggles will maintain colonialism based on a politics of secondary marginalization in which the most elite members of these groups will further their aspirations on the backs of those most marginalized within the community.

Fortunately, many indigenous and racial justice movements are beginning to see that addressing heteropatriarchy is essential to dismantling settler colonialism and white supremacy. The Native Youth Sexual Health Network, led by Jessica Yee, integrates queer analysis, indigenous feminism, and decolonization into its organizing praxis. Incite!, a national activist group led by radical feminists of color, similarly addresses the linkages between gender violence, heteropatriarchy, and state violence. And queer-of-color organizations such as the Audre Lorde Project have rejected centrist political approaches that demand accommodation from the state; rather, they seek to "queer" the state itself.

This queer interrogation of the "normal" is also present in more conservative communities. I see one such thread in evangelical circles—the emergent movement (or perhaps more broadly, the new evangelical movement). By describing the emergent movement as a queering of evangelicalism, I don't necessarily mean that it offers an open critique of homophobia (although some emergent church leaders such as Brian McClaren have spoken out against homophobia). Rather, I see this movement as challenging of normalizing logics within evangelicalism. This movement has sought to challenge the meaning of evangelicalism as being based on doctrinal

correctness, and instead to imagine it a more open-ended ongoing theological conversation. Certainly the Obama presidential campaign has inspired many evangelicals—even though they may hold conservative positions on homosexuality or abortion—to call for a politics that is more open-ended and engaged with larger social justice struggles. Perhaps because of this trend, evangelical leader John Stackhouse recently complained that the biggest change in evangelicalism is "the collapse of the Christian consensus against homosexual marriage." Unfortunately, many leftist organizers tend to dismiss or ignore these openings within evangelicalism, but at their own peril. Social transformation happens only through sustained dialogue with people across social, cultural, and political divides.

As I have shown here, I believe queer politics offers both a politics and a method for furthering social transformation. It is a politics that addresses how heteropatriarchy serves to naturalize all other social hierarchies, such as white supremacy and settler colonialism. It is also a method that organizes around a critique of the "normal" (in society as a whole or in social movements) and engages in open-ended, flexible, and ever-changing strategies for liberation.

Andrea Smith is the author of *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances* (Duke, 2008). She teaches at UC Riverside.

Smith, Andrea. 2010. Dismantling Hierarchy, Queering Society. *Tikkun* 25(4): 60