CHAPTER 6

Queering Broader Movements

Queers’ intransigent affirmation of the claims of desire immediately ran up against a major contradiction of neoliberal consumerism. Neoliberal societies summon up a myriad of desires and suggest they should be easily fulfilled. But in real life, ‘the satisfaction of these desires must be borne by the individuals themselves, as much as they can afford’. In insisting on the legitimacy of queer desire, queers implicitly demand that desire be capable of realisation, independently of the money and privilege needed to have wants fulfilled in a neoliberal order. Queer activism thus had a tendency from the start to contest neoliberalism.¹

If it is to successfully help challenge and defeat neoliberalism, a queer politics cannot be a merely personal or cultural project. As chapter 5 showed, it requires an independent queer political movement that fights for radical sexual demands. At the same time, it requires a social transformation that LGBT people cannot bring about in isolation. Queers need allies. To be effective allies for a queer politics, broader, class-based and other social movements need to be queered: opened up to queer people, queer leadership, queer issues and queer approaches to organising. Chapter 6 focuses on the prospects for queering these broader movements.

Only queered movements can address basic LGBT needs like housing for queer relationships, and safety and independence for queer youth. Movements around healthcare from ACT UP to the South African Treatment Action Campaign have been exemplary cases of queered social movements. Going beyond these movements, since the working class in the broad sense is indispensable to social transformation, labour activism too has to be queered. This can involve work-related organising that existing unions are not yet tackling—in the sex trade, for example. At the same time, the queering of existing unions should be linked to challenges to bureaucracy and class collaboration.

Given how embattled individual social movements have been under neoliberalism, the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of an attempt to join different anti-neoliberal movements into a unified force: the global justice movement. It too needs to be queered. So does the anti-capitalist left, which remains necessary to provide political direction in the battle against capital and the state, but needs to be rebuilt and imbued with a new dynamism if

it is to be made fit-for-purpose and overcome its current weakness. Finally, this chapter argues, democracy itself needs to be queered, to make it inclusive of all those whom neoliberal democracy today excludes, and to make it embrace sexual and other realms of life that capitalism declares out of bounds to democracy.

Basics of Queer Anti-Capitalism

This overview makes clear that while personal politics is undoubtedly important, a radical queer politics also has to involve organising and activism in the public sphere. LGBT people have the potential to play a significant role in challenging the existing world order. Mobilisation and self-organisation of those who suffer most directly from neoliberalism, though offering no panaceas, are nevertheless indispensable. Self-organisation, including LGBT self-organisation, needs to take place in the most basic units of society – families (traditional kinship-based families or ‘families of choice’) and communities – so as to counter policies imposed from above by the state and capital.

Another core dynamic has to be solidarity. Far-reaching queer demands that do not fit into any existing government’s or mainstream current’s agenda can only be won by building a powerful oppositional force. A credible prospect of realising and sustaining alternatives to neoliberal sexual politics requires deploying a broad constellation of social forces. An intersectional or transversal politics, including alliances against sexism, racism and neoliberal globalisation, is not just a practical requirement for making headway in LGBT politics; it is constitutive of what an effectively radical queer force would be. Queer people cannot be themselves in most workplaces or lead healthy lives except as part of queered labour and healthcare movements. Genuine democratic participation by queers is only possible as part of a broader movement to transform formal, manipulative democracy into genuine, substantive democracy.

So what would a queer anti-capitalism look like? It would necessarily have some things in common with the existing anti-capitalist left. In any event, it would not turn its back on LGBT people who are older, or those in steady relationships, or those with decent-paying jobs. Queer anti-capitalists are a natural component of the ‘99 percent’ that movements like Occupy and the indignad@s have worked to rally against the crisis. The potential of queer anti-capitalism was manifest in the visible LGBT presence in the massive protests in 2013 in Brazil and Turkey. Negatively, as Ghassan Makarem has noted, the Egyptian revolution has raised issues of gender and sexuality ‘from day one’, mainly because both the old regime and Islamic fundamentalists have used