

Preface

National Security Wars – Then and Now

National security campaigns are very much in the news as we put the finishing touches to this book. Under the guise of the “war on terror,” “evidence” provided by Canadian security police resulted in the extradition (i.e., rendition) of Maher Arar to Syria, with the knowledge that he would be tortured.¹ We have seen the indefinite detention of Muslim- and Arab-identified “non-citizens” under the so-called national security certificates as well as the racial profiling and targeting of people identified as Arabs and Muslims.² Under cover of national security, we have seen the mobilization of racism and the continued denial of human and civil rights. The targets of these most recent national security campaigns are once again defined as enemies of Canada, are denied citizenship, and are identified as national security risks. At times, allegations of “national security risk” and even “terrorism” have been directed towards global justice and anti-poverty activists who challenge the injustice and misery that capitalist social relations have produced in the lives of people around the globe.³

In all this we hear the echoes of earlier national security campaigns against suspected lesbians and gay men – campaigns that took place across the Canadian state from the 1950s into the late 1990s and that, in some ways, continue today. These earlier campaigns live on in the current national security war, which is now directed at new targets. We therefore reject current national security campaigns, and we support those who have been tortured and imprisoned for no reason other than their perceived country of origin or their assumed religious and/or political commitments. In resisting this current national security war, we must critically examine earlier national security campaigns both within the Canadian state and elsewhere. There is much to be learned by linking the earlier story of national security wars against queers with current campaigns against Arabs and Muslims. We cannot view the injustices of these campaigns as simply “mistakes” or “excesses” committed by a few overzealous security operatives; rather, these injustices are an integral part of the ideology and practice of national security itself. There is something very dangerous at the heart of national security, and we need to challenge and resist it.

While we have been working on this book in our historical present, during the so-called war on terror, we have been surprised to find that, since 9/11, the relatively constant generation of fear and crisis over security issues has not resulted in major attempts to learn from earlier national security campaigns against “others.” It is as if we are so mesmerized by the spectacle of 9/11 that we have forgotten the earlier history of national security and its wars on “subversion.” In part, this is because the ideology of the war on terror works through ahistorical decontextualization, which results in the forgetting of how national security operated long before September 2001. Given this context, we hope *The Canadian War on Queers* succeeds in linking this past to our historical present.

In this book we provide a detailed and critical examination of the social organization of the national security campaigns against lesbians and gay men from the 1950s until the present. This is not simply a sad and depressing story about injustices committed against those identified as lesbian and gay; it is also very much a story of how this experience was lived by the people most directly affected and how, even in extremely difficult circumstances, there was always resistance. For instance, even in the restrictive atmosphere of the 1960s, it was possible for people involved in lesbian and gay networks to force security police to alter their tactics.

The Canadian War on Queers has been a long time coming. In 1998, we released a preliminary research report on national security campaigns against lesbians and gay men, focusing on the late 1950s and the 1960s.⁴ Since then we have done a great deal more research, especially on the national security surveillance of the lesbian and gay activist movement in the 1970s and developments in the 1980s and 1990s. We hope this book is well worth the wait, although, given the urgency of the questions it raises, we are pained by how long it has taken for it to see the light of day.

Most of this book is a duet; however, since Gary was personally involved in some of the events that we describe, his particular voice comes through at times, and this is signalled by a sans serif font. The following vignette is an example of this.

TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF “COMMIE PINKO FAG” – NATIONAL SECURITY AND ME

My life history as a gay man and an activist is interwoven with a number of the stories told in this book. I am, therefore, very interested in this critical interrogation of national security for multiple personal, political, and social/historical reasons.

“Commie, pinko, fag.” This used to be scrawled on my locker and was used as a greeting in the halls when I was a student at Victoria Park Secondary School in Don Mills in the early 1970s. I was involved in the radical left as a member of the Young Socialists and, later, of the Revolutionary Marxist Group, so the “commie” part made some sense to me. I never understood where the “pinko” came from. The sole basis for the “fag” part seemed to be my refusal to laugh at the anti-gay jokes that were all-pervasive at my school.⁵ A certain type of “cutting out” operation was mobilized against me, much as George Smith describes, as I was socially cut out of regular forms of “normal” heterosexual interaction.⁶ I do remember some of the school jocks squirming when I pointed out to them that they spent all their time hanging out with other guys. It was during these years that I was beginning to explore my sexuality and starting to come out to myself and to others as gay. So I did become an anti-Stalinist “commie fag.”

My interest in national security campaigns against queers flows from my continuing interest in exploring where this association between commies and fags, which has been integral to my experience, has come from historically and socially. And this particular association was forged in important ways during the years of the national security campaigns against gay men and lesbians, and also through the very real connections of some queer activists with sections of the left.⁷

I made an Access to Information request for my personal files in 1999 in preparation for this book, only to be disappointed by the RCMP’s response. I received a letter saying that no such files existed. I know they should have had information on me since I knew they did surveillance work on the Revolutionary Marxist Group. When my father’s workplace was taken over by the government for a period of time he was even asked a security-related question about me. I have been involved in the left since 1971 and in the gay movement since 1972. I have been present at many of the events, demonstrations, and conferences at which the RCMP conducted surveillance in the 1970s, and I was at the Young Socialist convention, where the RCMP put letters on everyone’s chairs during the lunch break (this is referred to in Chapter 8).

THE HISTORICAL PAST, THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

In contrast to the historical past, which involved the general national security campaigns against lesbians and gay men from the late 1950s through the 1990s, the historical present finds us in a rather different position with regard to lesbian and gay rights.⁸ Although the national security campaigns against queers are not over, especially for those of us deemed to be in the closet or to have

something to hide, and for those of us who are people of colour (specifically those identified as Arab and Muslim), the lesbian and gay movements have made remarkable progress with regard to human rights.⁹ We have won important human rights victories and have been able to utilize the shift in Canadian state legal formation signalled by Section 15 (the equality rights section) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was enacted in the 1980s. For example, there has been significant progress on basic human rights protection, spousal rights, family recognition rights, and same-sex marriage rights. This has led some to view the existing federal form of the Canadian state, and particularly the Charter, as crucial to queer liberation.¹⁰

At the same time, major forms of sexual censorship remain, as do issues relating to the criminalization of our consensual sexualities, and many queer people experience poverty, racism, sexism, and class exploitation. Although the December 2005 Supreme Court decision regarding “swingers” clubs in Montreal expanded the ability of heterosexuals to engage in sexual activities in sex clubs, such freedom has not been extended to gay men in bathhouses and sex clubs, and queer sex can still be defined as “acts of indecency.”¹¹ This shapes the contradictory situations queer people now face. On the one hand, lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals have won recognition of our individual human rights; we have established our formal equality with heterosexuals in a number of realms. On the other hand, we have yet to establish substantive social equality with heterosexuals, and major forms of marginalization, exclusion, violence, and hatred continue to exist.¹² Legal acceptance of our rights has done little to create full social acceptance of our sexualities and lives. Grudging acceptance of rights for queer people can still easily give way to expressions of hatred and violence. *The Canadian War on Queers* thus reminds us of the heterosexist past and the ways in which it continues in the historical present as a central part of Canadian state and social formation.

For example, the current federal Conservative government – supported by the Liberals and most of the NDP – raised the age of sexual consent from fourteen to sixteen without proposing a comparable reduction in the current age of consent from eighteen to sixteen for anal sex (often homosexualized in official discourse) outside Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia. This change will have a major impact on queer young people, and young people more generally, decreasing their ability to gain access to sexual and safe sex information.

In 2009, our right to marry has been established through federal legislation, even though it has been contested by the current Conservative government.¹³ The present government cannot overturn the legislation; however, by raising the issue, it continues to create opportunities for moral conservative organizing

and anti-queer bigotry. More moderate forces in our communities and movements, as well as much of the media, view winning the right to marriage as an end point of our struggles.¹⁴ It is suggested that, in winning the right to marry, we have achieved full equality (really full integration) and that our oppression will soon be over. Although, as queer authors and activists, we welcome this victory and support the fight for formal equality, in our view this legal victory has neither magically eliminated our oppression nor encouraged discussion of developing forms of relationships based on equality and democracy outside institutionalized marriage.¹⁵ The focus on our right to marry has been tied up with strategies for integrating us into the existing capitalist, patriarchal, and racist social order and with strategies for how we can perform social “respectability” and “responsibility.”¹⁶ We need to challenge existing social forms such as marriage, which have historically been based on our exclusion and marginalization as well as on the oppression of women, and we need to focus more on how to transform oppressive social relations and how to build social alternatives.

Some queers – but only some – are now being included in the fabric of the “nation” and the “national security” mobilized in its defence. In the context of the national security state and the war on terror, some queers (usually white, middle-class men) are now defending national security against a series of “others” (including people of Arab descent and Muslims in Canada), against global justice and anti-capitalist protesters, against people living in poverty, against prostitutes and hustlers, and against groups of queer people such as queers of colour, queers living in poverty, and young queers. It is for these reasons that we must proceed with caution in our fight for legal “victories,” as these may well continue to perpetuate social exclusions based on class, race, gender, and sexuality.

This strategy of integration and normalization is tied up with the emergence of stronger professional, managerial, and middle-class social strata within gay and lesbian communities. The people who occupy these strata share a number of social commitments with the broader middle class. They are not interested in questioning the social relations of capitalism and raise only those queer issues that do not challenge these relations.¹⁷ They are invested in the commercialization and commodification of capitalist society.¹⁸ Such people often suggest that existing Canadian state formation and, especially, the equality rights section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms are the royal road to our liberation.¹⁹ Although the use of Section 15 has been crucial to our struggles, including those against the national security regime during the 1980s and 1990s, it has not brought about our liberation. And the strategy of integration, which is premised on the desirability of being incorporated within the heterosexually defined

nation, leads to a reconciliation with the forces of national security. We come back to some of the limitations of this strategy in Chapters 11 and 12. The analysis developed in this book is directed not only at locating resources for our current battles against national security but also at providing ways for queer activists in the historical present to reignite a more radical movement – one that gets at the root of the problem and resists a strategy of integration that would see us buy into a “normality” and a “respectability” that includes support for national security.