

Über Leslie Feinberg

Determine, define, modify: Gender

Isa Leshko

Leslie Feinberg is fighting for a world that enables us to determine, define, and modify our sex and gender whenever and however we choose.

(This article originally appeared in Sojourner, newspaper, a monthly publication and is made available here with the permission of the publisher.) "We have the right to express our gender in any way we choose, whether it be feminine or masculine or any point between," s/he asserts. For example, we can have both breasts and a penis, or don a dress and a beard, or use the pronoun 's/he.'

This kind of gender subversion runs throughout in Feinberg's first book Stone Butch Blues, a novel about a butch lesbian who grows up in a factory town during the 1950s. The novel won American Library Association Award for Gay and Lesbian Literature and a Lambda Literary Award in 1994.

Feinberg is an activist, journalist, and typesetter by trade. Drawing on his extensive background as a union organizer includes work with Lesbian, Gay and Transgender Labor Network based in New York City. His work draws upon history, politics, philosophy to illuminate the roots of oppression. As a tireless advocate for trans liberation, s/he frequently tours the country to lecture at universities, community centers, conferences, and rallies. S/he also was an invited speaker at the Stonewall 25 rally in 1994 that drew millions of Queer people from around the world.

His audiences have been "overwhelmingly enthusiastic," a response that reminds Feinberg of the second wave of women's liberation. "During that period, every time an oppression was revealed it energized everyone," s/he says. "It broke the silence and taboos and helped validate other people's lives and oppressions." The same is happening today as women realize how transgender issues are connected to their own freedom.

Although analysis of gender has been developed by feminists since Simone de Beauvoir, trans liberation is revitalizing the discussion of what it means to be 'woman' in this society. "We're redrawing the theoretical map by showing the depth and breath of sex and gender oppression," s/he says. "This is done by examining the extent to which the struggle that women face connects to the struggle of all who are not masculine, property owning rulers."

And not being 'masculine' (read: white, rich, heterosexual) can be deadly. "When I go down to the piers in New York, I see 17-year-old African-American and Latina drag queens and transsexual women being forced to live on the streets and turn tricks in order to buy a hamburger," s/he says. "....Racism and classism effects every part of their daily lives-- their consciousness, their interactions, what they eat, if they're going to sleep well that night."

By tracing the interconnectivity of oppressions, Feinberg hopes to evoke the broadest coalitions possible. S/he asserts that we can no longer afford to use assimilationist approach to activism. "When a young movement forms, it gets a great deal of pressure to put forward only its best-dressed and most articulate--which is usually a code word for white," s/he says.

These 'representatives' are seduced into thinking the best way to win is to not rock the boat and ask for only minimal demands. Feinberg finds that once these people enter the board room, they never leave it. A more potent strategy relies upon unified numbers. "We need everyone and cannot afford to throw anyone overboard," says Feinberg. "Afterall, we could never get rid of enough people to please our enemies and make ourselves 'acceptable.'" This approach also employs grassroots organizing to educate communities and to support people within a movement. An example this plan's efficacy is the recent uprising in France. "It was inspiring to see that many people take to the streets to demand the survival and expansion of provisions for health care, food, housing and jobs," s/he says. "That kind of struggle is the only thing that will ultimately save the lives of generations of kids who would otherwise be forced on the streets. The French people have demonstrated that the plans of the powers that be can be changed."

According to Feinberg, this strategy is gaining momentum because people are terrified of the economic realities imposed upon them. S/he says: "Most of the people I know are working a couple of jobs, and don't even have health insurance. The ravages of AIDS, breast cancer and even treatable diseases like tuberculosis are on the rise. People see their lives being vilified in the media, in the halls of Congress or in these right wing campaigns from state to state." Indeed, none of us can afford or even maintain the delusion of being unaffected. In order to develop lasting coalitions, Feinberg advocates the open confrontation of prejudices that weaken unity. "People should not fear opening up discussions about any form of oppression," s/he says. "A great many fears and misunderstandings have been sown to divide us. Our [oppressors] try to place barbed wire between us while they come after our civil rights and try to defeat us."

One such misinterpretation is the stereotype that the working class is the most politically reactionary class and the root source of bigotry. Feinberg says that one of his goals for Stone Butch Blues was to dispel this kind of anti-working class propaganda. S/he adds: "My experience has been that working people, particularly those who are organized in unions, are the most receptive to building coalitions. They've witnessed how our enemies try to split us up during a strike, and they are less likely to be baited." Feinberg also points out that major union organizations consistently have lobbied for progressive legislation that provides federal protection for people's lives. A recent example is the support the AFL-CIO provided Maine Won't Discriminate (MWD), a coalition that worked to defeat the anti-gay referendum that would have legalized discrimination based on sexual orientation. According to Feinberg, the union was instrumental in MWD's success by donating money, volunteer power and pamphlets.

"As the AFL-CIO have done, we need to rally for any group that's under the gun," s/he says. "The best way to build solidarity is to prove that we can be the best fighters of each other's oppressions. Being there for each other will forge bonds of unity that can't be broken."

S/he is particularly optimistic about the coalition of the lesbian and transgender liberation movements. S/he conceptualizes these communities as two circles that partially overlap. As someone who exists in that junction, s/he hopes to be a bridge between the two movements. S/he elaborates on this experience in her upcoming book *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Ru Paul*, which will be available in March.