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THE CONSERVATIVE DILEMMA AND THE CONFUSING NAZI SUBTEXT OF LEATHER CULTURE “THE HIGH PRIEST OF S&M”

By the nurture of sexuality, Larry, because homosexuality is an inner teacher that guides us, changed most of his reactionary nature and disciplined himself to evolve to positive centrist values around race and gender diversity, and to exit the Republican Party. In the early 1970s, Larry converted, and became a leading gay activist Democrat because it was the right thing to do in the gay mainstream when the principal debate in the gay lib of the 1970s was, as preached in *The Advocate*, about what kind of respectable gays in suits and ties, rather than bohemians in beads, or freaks in leather, should represent us in American media and popular culture.

After the 1971 Christopher Street Pride Parade in West Hollywood, the Republican Larry wrote an editorial against people wearing suggestive pop-art costumes. He recoiled from future Academy Award Oscar Streaker and leatherman Robert Opel marching inside his seven-foot-tall “Mr. Penis” costume, and from a guy dressed up as a life-size jar of Vaseline. He specifically denounced a “Cockapillar” costume created by gay crusader Pat Rocco (1934-2018) who began directing gay films he sold via mail-order in 1968 at the same time that Larry began writing gay novels. Like Townsend and Opel, Rocco became a frequent contributor to *Drummer*. His “Cockapillar” construction was a giant pink bulldozer penis head fronting a long horizontal matching cock-shaft worn on the backs of seven performance artists walking a conga-line of legs through the crowds much like a dragon in a Chinese New Year parade. Faced with this irresistible market

trend of gay pop culture toward deploying ever more outrageous performance-art drag, he changed his tune.

Larry was typical of many queer folk who, born into conservative families, would otherwise grow up as fundamentalist as their parents—except for that wild card of homosexuality which offers them a way out of the sins of the parents, and schools them into empathy, and often, in this metanoia, turns them liberal if their personality is more balanced than it is just plain “Iowa Stub-born.” Sometimes, on the sliding scale of politics, some, born into right-wing Christian families, turn coat, but not temperament, and become far-left reactionaries. He was so personally aware of this fundamentalist struggle that he addressed the issue directly in “The Conservative Dilemma,” Chapter 14 in *Leatherman’s Handbook II*.

In *The Advocate*, May 23, 1973, Martin St. John reported on left-wing extremists, costume issues, and the attempt to de-gay the LA gay parade:

In 1972, the [gay] parade planning was taken over, by and large, by militant gay women—one group sworn to “clean up” [the costumes worn in] the parade, the other agitating for an anti-war, rather than a gay pride, theme, for the march.

Larry exited the macho right-wing of his military youth, and marched to the viable political center. The trained spy warned that the gay left-wing was as unsustainable as the right, despite the fantasy that all the best gay folk are leftist and wonderful just because in the gay-lib ponzi pyramid so many early organizers visible in the news media were left-wing activists and Communists like Mattachine founder Harry Hay who helped originate gay political resistance in the 1940s and 1950s.

Larry, a psychologist graduated from UCLA and trained by the Air Force in gathering military intelligence, watched the Hollywood *mise en scene* of gay revolution in Silver Lake turn the aspirational Mattachine Steps into a gay Odessa Steps sequence of queer mutiny. He was an observant witness and critic who reacted to the right-left polarity, cannibal infighting, and Communism

inside the LA Mattachine Society itself in 1953 when red-baiting conservative and progressive power struggles famously caused the entire Mattachine board of founders to take opposing sides and resign in a mid-1950s act of gay separatism that inflamed the gay civil war in which Larry soon served.

Larry, the anti-Communist, was not fascist or Nazi. In fact, he was a leader of organized resistance against gay and straight authoritarian diktats. He loomed large in Los Angeles media when S&M was not understood in gay pop culture. At the moment he founded his LT Publications, he was attacked by some for being the ringleader stoking the rise of fascism in gay culture because S&M seemed much too authoritarian to gay-libbers who thought that S&M in the bedroom caused fascism in the streets. In the *Los Angeles Free Press*, April 14, 1972, Craig A. Hanson, the founder emeritus of the Los Angeles Gay Community Alliance, exposed his own bias.

Fundamentally, S&M is authoritarian, demanding superior-inferior relationships, and, as I have a disturbing suspicion [shared by the politically-correct extremists and the LAPD], a penchant for an authoritarian society.

Leathermen über alles? Isn't that the silly heart of Mel Brooks' satirical 1967 Academy Award winner, *The Producers*?

Hanson headlined his *J'Accuse* anti-S&M feature with the snarky gender-snap title, "Locked Up by Closet Queens: Gay Sadosomochism." He identified Larry as an S&M "High Priest," and denounced him as the *cause* of all the trouble in River City.

As my article explains, I do not approve of the S&M Cult or of sadosomochism, but it exists and needs explaining...because of the election of S&M "High Priest" Larry Townsend as president of H.E.L.P. (Homophile Effort for Legal Protection).

Reacting to Larry and his homomale leather fans, Hanson continued, revealing the rise in the civil war of gay Quislings threatening and terrorizing other gays.

...a new and very secret organization. Gay Zap, has been... sending crank letters to S&M bars...demanding changes of policy...and promising police action against the S&M people if they don't change their politics and behavior.

Then like a Nielsen Rating of trends in gay pop culture, he wrote he was concerned by the

...rise in the S&M personal ads [attracted by Larry's columns] in *The Advocate* newspaper so they now account for 20% of the listings...

In a grudging compliment, he noted all the new and welcome "political activity by the seventeen Los Angeles bike and leather-oriented clubs and the nine leather-western gay bars." Then he had to admit something about the undeniable value of Larry's political action that Larry began at H.E.L.P.

This [leather] subculture is a very stable element in the gay community (many bike clubs have been going for years) and constitutes its greatest organizational reservoir.... Only recently [along with Larry] have they shown an interest in gay civil rights.

He closed defining the anti-leather bigotry that Larry as a Leather Sisyphus was up against.

For many, gay and straight alike, no other form of sexual expression seems more repulsive than sadomasochism.... Gay liberation is not just for counter-culture gays and political radicals because they say they have the proper political or social consciousness, nor is it only for transvestites and other fem-identified males just because they have flung their homosexuality in the face of society for so long. There can be no second-class gay people who must remain in the closet while the rest are liberated. By ignoring and even persecuting S&M people, organized homosexuality—the gay newspapers, churches, political groups, and liberation organizations—has done exactly what straight society has done to the rest of us.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

Calling for understanding, Hanson called for action.

Homosexual sadomasochism is one subject the gay liberation movement has never discussed....S&M has been the bad boy of the gay world, and only during the past months has anything been written about it....Coming to terms with S&M is one of the real challenges for the gay lib movement.

Even so, he could not help confusing sex and violence about leather fun and games in Hollywood where costumes and role-playing ought to be understood.

S&M...supposedly directs violence by channeling it to certain specific sexual encounters. Men are drawn from those sublimated homosexual desires which [here, amazingly, he condemns male homosexuality itself with a blood libel] have boiled over into war, and into violence eroticized into sex. Ever read about the origins of the Nazi Party? Most of the early Nazis were homosexual sadomasochists, and they didn't sublimate anything.

With malice like that, no wonder that Larry from the first time he put pen to paper spent his long vocation as a goodwill ambassador writing men's S&M adventure stories in handbooks, novels, stories, and advice columns to educate readers about the existential truth and value of leather culture.

It's gay gossip that some people from liberal to conservative on the Rainbow Spectrum—acting, or reacting, out of identity politics or existential curiosity or empathy or counterphobia—are sometimes driven by a sweet lust to put their intellectual, political, racial, and gendered ideas of their public selves aside to seek out their own literal physical experiences in top or bottom S&M role-play in private scenes in imaginary military brigs, southern plantations, and concentration camps. If they don't dare play in a real dungeon with a real sex partner, they do it solo masturbating to the pop culture of books, magazines, and videos in the multibillion-dollar kink sex industry.

Most people are bottoms most of the time, and consumers are voracious for magazines like *Drummer* and books like Larry's which led the Stonewall Era charge into kink fantasy. Through the years, I've worked with the subscription lists of several gay magazines and video companies which contain the names of famous folk who live politically-correct vanilla lives by day, but keep S&M art, literature, and porn under the bed where their friends can't see their guilty pleasure and hypocrisy. Larry's lists were just the same. They thrive on this conflation which socially rejects the very leathersex that sexually defines their passion. Their framed print of the Mapplethorpe calla lily hanging in the dining room gets a secret *frisson* from the Mapplethorpe cock hanging in the bedroom.

It is a gay popular-culture truth: millions more people read the 214 issues of *Drummer*, with its monthly press run of 42,000 copies at its height during twenty-four years (1975-1999) than have read all that fin de siècle's best-selling American gay novels combined. A book comes out sealed with its author's ideas once. A magazine comes out refreshed with its contributors' new ideas monthly.

There is many a man in leather, and many a member of the gay uniform clubs, and many a Leni Riefenstahl film fan whose erotic imagination trumps absolute political correctness. At more than one leather bar on its midweek movie night, such as Larry's San Francisco favorite, the Ramrod, the bartender often screened a twenty-minute montage of beautiful homoerotic images of male athletes, including Black gold-medalist Jesse Owens, from the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. The clip was cut, minus its Nazi propaganda, from Riefenstahl's film, *Olympia* (1938). If 1970s leathermen had been actual Nazi sympathizers, they'd have been watching Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935).

We men who flourished in the 1970s are the last gay generation alive to remember the winds of that war. Larry and I and boys like us lived through those five terrifying years playing "soldier" shooting at Nazis and dropping rocks off the roof of the garage yelling, "Tojo! Tojo! Bombs over Tokyo!" Tom of Finland, at our first meeting on February 9, 1978, told me how much erotic impact Nazi men had on him. Tom was twenty-five when the war ended

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and Larry was fifteen and I was six. Tom's compeer, the edgier artist Rex, born during the war, was, because of his coded fine-art portfolios of severe Teutonic-American leathermen, denounced as a "Naziphile" in that ad absurdum essay, "S&M: The Dark Side of Gay Liberation" in *The Village Voice*, July 7, 1975. In response in 1976, *Drummer* published a Rex leatherman stylishly harnessed on the cover of the "Holiday Issue," number ten; and then featured the pointillist artist alongside Robert Mapplethorpe (who collected Rex's prints and was influenced by Rex's leather visions) in the 1978 special S&M art issue, *Son of Drummer*.

Many S&M men, especially those born around the midcentury World War, fantasize about fascism in the same way that Larry, who served as a teenage anti-Nazi plane-spotter at the Peddie School, romanced fascism by transposing its evil power plays—in the counterphobic way leather culture digests problematic realities—into the beating sadomasochistic heart of his writing. Larry was a purposeful reader gleaned world history whose undercurrents of sex and sadism he adapted into dozens of sexy historical novels from *The Fairy King: The Life of Henri II, King of France* (1970) to his 649-page magnum opus, *Czar! A Novel of Ivan the Terrible* (1998). As shown in photos, a shelf in his office was lined with several best-selling histories of the Third Reich. When stationed with the U.S. Air Force in Germany, he became a devotee of Joseph Musil's bildungsroman *Young Törless*, a 1906 novel he recommended about S&M brutality in the German military just before the rise of the Nazis. Larry, the political activist, was so aware of the pop-culture confusion of leather and Nazis that he directly addressed the psycho-erotic nexus with many references throughout both *The Leatherman's Handbook* and its sequel *The Leatherman's Handbook II* (1983) in which he wrote:

I can't imagine anyone in his right mind seriously wanting to revert to this [Nazi] period. As with many other historical evils, the fantasy will exclude the reality and the horror. We focus only on the parts we find stimulating, or titillating. The same barrier of time and/or space makes it possible to look on other atrocities in a very different light from the people who had to endure them:

Nazi Germany, Vietnam, Czarist Russia, Inquisitionist Spain, Borgian Italy, various Latin American settings. Such are often the bases for many of our best and most exciting stories.

After every war, with or without Nazis, there is an afterglow of romantic and erotic nostalgia in popular culture, fiction, and films. In 1974 and 1975, while the next war in Vietnam was raging to its disgraceful end on the roof of the American Embassy, the first issues of *Drummer* went to press with a few images of actors in the previous war playing Nazis in Hollywood films. At that moment, movie critics could not decide if two ravishing hit films directed by women about sadomasochistic sex in concentration camps—Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* and Lina Wertmüller's *Seven Beauties*—were arthouse cinema or Holocaust porn.

In the 1970s of Larry's advent, every American gay-bar customer aged thirty and older had lived through the war with the Nazis. Our dear friend Hank Diethelm (1928-1983), the German immigrant owner of the popular Brig bar on Folsom Street in San Francisco, had been forced into the Hitler Youth, and at age seventeen in 1945 fled west to be rescued by American soldiers. He could never shake off his counterphobic lust for domination by perfect young Nazis. I could only imagine what private concentration camp fantasies went on in his head when in May 1970, he pitched me about filming a ritual castration scene of the kind Larry would write about in Chapter 9, "The Castration Complex, Real and Symbolic," in his second *Handbook*.

Knowing Hank, I figured he wanted to step out of himself and watch himself on screen in a kind of crypto-Nazi horror film, like Larry's favorite flick, Kenneth Anger's 1963 *Scorpio Rising*, starring himself in a Super-8 S&M scene. Often screened in leather bars including Hank's Brig, Anger's 28-minute film about gay-specific Nazi bikers had more influence shaping the twisting helix of the leather psyche than did Marlon Brando's straight film, *The Wild One* (1953).

Hank was a sweet man always aglow with *Gemütlichkeit* that got him whatever he wanted. So, because my then-lover David Sparrow and I were his house guests, we felt obliged to shoot the

ten-minute bespoke film as a faked fantasia staged, with David as his co-star, in his basement dungeon on Bemis Street, but with absolutely no suggestion of anything Nazi because since my terrified wartime boyhood I've been anti-Nazi. In *Drummer* 128, assistant editor Ken Lackey confirmed my stance telling readers: "I'll bet Jack could lick ten neo-fascists with one hand tied behind his back!" So, regarding Hank's fetish, fourteen years of S&M play later in 1984, some people became further confused about S&M and Nazis when Hank was tied up and murdered and set on fire in the basement of his home by a leatherman who was likely mentally ill before he entered leather culture.

Like Hank, many a gay movie-goer of Larry's generation was amused in the 1970s by hilariously camp Nazisploitation films like the great Don Edmunds' *Ilsa: She-Wolf of the SS*, and *Salon Kitty* directed by Tinto Brass who also directed the wildly scandalous male-male "fisting film" *Caligula*, scripted by Gore Vidal and starring Helen Mirren; by Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salo* which I reviewed aggressively in *Drummer*; and by films depicting Nazi General Ernst Röhm, the commander of the gay SA Brownshirt soldiers murdered during their exquisite orgy in deshabille drag on the "Night of the Long Knives" which Luchino Visconti dramatized operatically as thwarted gay romance in his 1969 film *The Damned*. Clips from the divine decadence of that motion picture, along with clips from Roger Corman's campy S&M flick *De Sade* (1969), were also frequently screened on Tuesdays, the typical movie night invented to drum up midweek business in leather bars.

Wised up to Nazis, the human condition, and the problem of evil, director Cavani, like Pasolini and Townsend, considered the works of de Sade as the basic text of human nature. She said de Sade should be taught in schools. Larry taught de Sade in his writing. Leather bars taught de Sade in their nightly tutorials. Leathermen did their homework.

Hitler's politically-correct Nazi party founded at the Furstfelder Hof pub in Munich on January 5, 1919, was indeed centered around beer halls, homosexuals, camaraderie, uniforms, and short leather pants—just like gay leather culture.

No wonder that leathermen, crowding into darkened bars for those Tuesday movie nights, found an ironic outlaw *frisson* in standing en masse drinking, smoking, groping, and laughing at clips like “Springtime for Hitler,” from *The Producers*.

Is there a movie-going leatherman alive who has not swooned in guilty pleasure to the platonic ideal of the stunning blond Hitler youth in Brownshirt uniform singing the fictitious fascist anthem, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” in *Cabaret*? The gay and Jewish composers John Kander and Fred Ebb wrote the song to teach how seductive propaganda music can be. The song is so seductively uplifting that theater audiences were surprised and shocked at their own mixed emotions trying to resist the recruiting of its sunny hotsy-totsy Nazi sex appeal. Director Bob Fosse’s *Cabaret* premiered in 1972 at the same moment Larry’s *Handbook* was published.

Larry noted the undercurrent of comedy in S&M culture in his *Handbook II*:

Even those long horsehide coats we see in vintage movies of the Nazi era can be quite a turn-on. I remember one night in a San Francisco bar [the Ramrod], watching a little guy in one of these Wehrmacht coats wandering around, and I was quite attracted to him until I got up close, and he whispered: “I would lek to schpink you.”

Publisher John Embry printed monthly display ads for the Gay Nazi Party in *Drummer* until I told him I’d quit as editor if he did not cease and desist. Larry in LA backed me in confronting Embry in San Francisco because, even though Larry was a West Hollywood action figure famous for whipping willing men to a Wagnerian beat, he was no fascist. He hated and equated Nazis, Communists, Marxists, and politically-correct gay extremists. Although he leaned conservative as alpha males often do, for all his bluster, you couldn’t find real fascism, sexism, or racism in him with a Geiger Counter. It’s all about perspective. (Six inches is what you make it.) What was ordinary fun for leathermen seemed extraordinary to outsiders. It is worth remembering that every avant-garde sex trip debuting in the new post-Stonewall

trip of the Titanic 1970s—especially to leathermen during the 1970s—seemed like a huge exaggeration of reality that was, nevertheless, reality. And freedom. And fun.

As late as *Drummer* 115 (April 1988), publisher Anthony DeBlase, who bought *Drummer* from Embry, continued Mel Brooks' anti-Nazi camp when he published a full-page ad picturing a uniformed German with riding crop and tall boots disciplining a floored *Drummer* reader. Soliciting subscriptions, the tag line read with the stereotyped comedy accent, "You Vill [*sic*] Read *Drummer*!"

In the *H.E.L.P. Drummer Newsletter*, volume 2, number 6, March, 1973, Larry warned against the rising gay militias of the extreme right and the extreme left, revealing his particular concerns about the infection of political correctness among young men and women being brainwashed by the kind of male and female Marxist separatists whom he loathed for their exclusionary heresies, sexist politics, and penis envy that often made his blood pressure boil. He wrote:

One of the most clear-cut indications that any social movement has "arrived" is the attempt by forces of the extreme right or extreme left to take it over. By this criterion, today's Gay Movement certainly qualifies.... A couple of weeks ago, the Kingmasters [men's group] were surprised to receive a visit by a gentleman who claimed to be "the American Party candidate for Governor in 1974."...In the question-and-answer period, the truth came out. This was the same man who had been placing classified ads in *The Advocate*, soliciting members for the "Gay Nazi Party."...The speaker was thanked and asked to leave.

Unfortunately, not all of the usurpers are this transparent. With the fall of Nazi Germany and the demise of [Republican Senator] Joe McCarthy, the nuts on the right have been deprived of their major power bases. They are not to be discounted, but the seriousness of their threat cannot compare to the insidious potential from the other extreme. *The leftists have always been there,*

of course, but it has been quite awhile since we have seen them in all their malicious glory [Italics added]. Over the weekend of February 3rd, at the California Committee for Sexual Law Reform Convention (H.E.L.P. Center), the rock was lifted and out they came! Following the time-honored tactic of the Socialist Workers' Party, their unspoken battle cry was: "*Take it over if you can, and if you can't—Destroy it!*" [Italics his]

Sadly enough, as is typical in any of these Communist Front efforts, the ringleaders are the only ones who fully understand what they are doing. They assume the posture of gurus, wise men (or women), having indoctrinated a noisy, enthusiastic bevy of young followers with the carefully calculated party line. The kids who carry the ball are acting largely in good faith, unaware of the use being made of them. And so it was at the California Committee Convention.

The SWP [Socialist Workers Party] has made stronger and heavier inroads into the lesbian branch of the Movement than many of us suspected, while some of the men...were the old-time socialist revolutionaries we have seen and heard since the days of the *Gay Liberation Front* [Italics added].

Is this where it's at? I was under the impression that the Gay Movement had matured....that the rational approach of utilizing the laws and courts and the other mechanisms of the Establishment to gain our ends within the system was the route we were going to follow. Apparently, I was wrong.

Years later, in *The Leatherman's Handbook II*, he penned a special "negotiation" section titled "Women" in Chapter 14, "The Maestro's Circular File."