



Credit: Dean Spade.

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It's So Queer to Give Away Money

by Dean Spade

In recent years, we've witnessed an increase in media, legislative, and judicial activity surrounding the issue of same-sex marriage. It's an issue that has prominently featured images of upper-class, white, professional gay and

lesbian couples. "Gay politics" has been defined most visibly as concerning whether couples like these can be legally recognized as co-parents, can inherit each other's wealth, and can share health benefits from each other's jobs.

While this sort of gay politics has been growing more visible, a different queer politics, focused on racial and economic justice and grassroots activism, has been growing stronger. Queer and trans people concerned about the growing wealth divide in the United States, the stagnation of wages, the increase in immigration enforcement and imprisonment, and the U.S. government's assault on poor people and people of color, both domestically and internationally, have been organizing. The activists and organizations leading this work have reframed queer politics and queer activism. They have declared that property rights associated with marriage and access to military service are not the greatest needs of the most vulnerable queer and trans people. They have been working on police brutality, welfare rights, immigration, health care access, foster care, criminalization, and other key issues facing queer and trans poor people and people of color.

At the same time, they have been redefining what activism should look like. Many have raised concerns about how the professionalization of queer and trans activism has changed its messages and its demands. Starting in the 1980s, the emerging "gay and lesbian rights" organizations, led mostly by white lawyers, business people, and other professionals, have produced the new agenda that has focused on the needs and concerns of gay and lesbian people with class privilege, often explicitly cutting out people of color, immigrants, trans people, people with disabilities, and poor people.

Those working to build a grassroots movement focused on the intertwined, intersecting priorities of racial and economic justice and queer and trans issues have observed that this work's agenda is often narrowed by its quest for philanthropic support. These activists have been developing grassroots fundraising strategies focused on raising money from communities directly affected by the work and their allies in order to build organizations that are accountable first and foremost to those communities rather than to wealthy donors or foundations. These organizations are seeking to build participatory, democratic movement infrastructure rather than elite, funder-driven agendas implemented by professional staff. Many are looking to social movements that have used membership models, including membership dues, to engage mass mobilization.

This grassroots racial-and-economic-justice-focused queer and trans politics, while less visible than the same-sex marriage debate, is making significant strides. It has won measures of increased accountability from the larger, wealthier gay and lesbian rights organizations and foundations, many of which are starting to roll out "racial justice" programming. It has also won meaningful law and policy victories and developed coalitional alliances with enormous political potential. This work, including the increased focus on grassroots fundraising and on examining race and class privilege in movement organizations, has led to important conversations about the personal politics of wealth redistribution.

Many people are talking and thinking about what it means to practice our politics in our own day-to-day lives when it comes to complex questions about money, security, consumption, and community. As we fight for a

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world in which all people have what they need, in which people need not make decisions based on fear of falling to the bottom, how do we apply those principles to our daily lives and decisions? How do our ideas about healing, care, redistribution, and interdependence relate to the feelings of scarcity, greed, and desire that living in capitalism cultivates inside us?

The Taboos, Fear, and Shame ... Around Having, Discussing, and Sharing Money

These questions are difficult because addressing them requires us to break taboos, to invent new community norms, and to struggle against tendencies toward judgment and shame. Many people are taught that it is rude or inappropriate to talk about money, especially how much money people make or have and what they do with it. Many people also feel overwhelmed by the violence of capitalism and the enormity of poverty. This overwhelm can lead to feeling immobilized by guilt about their own role in the system and their fear of being judged if they talk about it. Under these conditions, it is very hard to form an analysis, supported by friends and allies, about the impacts of our own behaviors. It can be hard to develop a meaningful approach to bringing our principles to life in our daily decisions rather than just reacting out of fear. In order to take the risk of making decisions that depart from cultural norms, we all need to feel like we have support, like we won't be bearing the risk of doing things differently by ourselves.

Luckily, queer and trans communities have some practice at this kind of work. We have long critiqued powerful shame-inducing norms about sexual practices, family structures, appearance, and behavior. We have celebrated sexual desires, gender expressions, and relationships that are marked as abnormal, criminal, or pathological by our cultures. We have done this despite disapproval from our families, vulnerability, and significant loss of security. We have felt the excitement of entering a queer space where we can see ways of life that are hidden or despised played up and celebrated, where we can exist for a moment in an alternative world, in which the most beautiful people are those reaching most daringly away from norms, even mocking them, bolstered by the enthusiasm and support of an audience thrilled by the defiance.

So many of the explosive alternatives offered by social movements of the 1960s and 1970s—those interventions that declared the personal political and that invited people to see the role of patriarchy, colonialism, white supremacy, and ableism in shaping their own consciousnesses, their daily behaviors and choices, and their most intimate practices—made the impact they did because so many people undertook this critique together and co-developed both their analysis and their alternative practices in community.

How Alternatives Are Built

Many of us are increasingly building a conversation in queer and trans and other activist spaces about what personal practices of wealth redistribution might look like. This conversation addresses a range of topics. People are talking about consumer practices: how can we assess what kinds of desires constitute needs in a culture permeated with advertising that tells us to base our self-worth on what we possess? High-tech gadgets designed to constantly distract and entertain us and also extend our work hours are rolled out weekly, wrapped in promises that we can all be smarter, more popular, and more efficient—how do we resist the message to buy, buy, buy?

We are also talking about practice related to risk and vulnerability. In a culture with a decreasing safety net, there is enormous fear-based pressure to save for retirement, unemployment, disability, children, and other life changes. A system that individualizes risk encourages people to look out for themselves alone and steel themselves against harm, knowing that they may face vulnerability alone. What kinds of structures would our communities need to put in place together so that we could trust that we would be cared for and that hoarding does not make the world safer for us? How can our queer and trans histories with caring for loved ones with AIDS, supporting youth abandoned by their families, and supporting queer and trans elders offer models?

We are also talking about giving away money. For some of us, that is about becoming monthly sustainers of grassroots organizations that focus on racial and economic justice, giving \$20 or \$100 or \$1,000 a month from our paychecks. For others, it is about breaking the taboo of talking about trust funds and inheritances, facing off with family members who are terrified by the idea of a child or grandchild who is refusing their birthright wealth out of a recognition that the inheritance system sustains wealth disparity and that all wealth is stolen. People often need significant community support to take those steps, just as we do when we come out as queer or trans.

These and other conversations are vitally important—but not because we naïvely believe they are all that is required to end wealth and poverty. The systemic conditions that produce capitalism and its violence are not going to be resolved just by my monthly donations or by someone else giving away a trust fund. However, these practices are also not separate from systemic change. They are about building resources for our resistance movements, and they are about doing the difficult emotional work of examining internalized capitalism. We know that the personal is political, both because material realities are composed of our collective practices, and because broad-based transformation often emerges from experiments taken up at the local level.

In 2008, Tyrone Boucher and I started a blog called Enough (enoughenough.org) that aims to create a space for cross-class dialogue about the personal politics of wealth redistribution. Contributors have shared their experiences and experiments, ranging from choosing to sell a house at below-market value to prevent gentrification, to throwing dinner parties aimed at building this conversation within a social scene, to confronting family about plans to give away inherited wealth. Many contributors have been inspired by the work of Resource Generation, an organization that works with young people with wealth on these issues, and its book, *Classified*, which is an excellent resource. To see examples of the emerging queer and trans racial and economic justice work, check out the Audre Lorde Project (alp.org), FIERCE! (fierceny.org), the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (srtp.org), and Queers for Economic Justice (q4ej.org).

Dean Spade is an assistant professor at the Seattle University School of Law and the founder of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. His first book is forthcoming from South End Press in Spring 2011.

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