Over the last five years, same-sex marriage has been a predominant issue in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Fights for same-sex marriage rights have succeeded in a few states, leading some to believe that the gay community is winning its battle for acceptance. But many in the LGBT movements for social justice question whether gay marriage is really the most critical issue for their communities.

This is a particularly pointed question in California where pro-gay marriage groups spent over $43 million to oppose Proposition 8, which outlawed same-sex marriage, despite the fact that domestic partnership in California provides almost the same benefits that same-sex marriage would.

A recent study done at Hunter College shows that the majority of LGBT people actually consider economic discrimination to be the No. 1 issue in their lives. And Lisa Duggan, New York University professor of social and cultural analysis has pointed out that queer white men are the most likely to be coupled whereas black lesbians are the least likely to be coupled, thus demonstrating that marriage will benefit gay white men more than queer women of color.

So, why has gay marriage became such a key issue for the LGBT community?

LGBT Trends: Economic and Cultural

Dean Spade, an assistant professor of law at Seattle University, suggests that the way the gay community came to prioritize marriage reflects a broader shift in politics away from an approach that looks at larger structural issues.

"In the social movements of the ’60s and ’70s, there were a lot of questions being asked about what oppression is and how to solve it. People were thinking about how policing, in general, impacts black communities in the U.S., and the ways in which militarism is a part of U.S. imperialism abroad, and how that reflects in the domestic arena... As movements professionalize and upper class people take the reins and set the agenda, a shift happens towards an individual rights framework."

Duggan believes that the focus on the individual and the family come from a similar economic root.

"The kind of social supports that were put in place between the ’30s and the ’70s have eroded since the ’80s," she observes. "If you have fewer services and fewer benefits provided by your employment and fewer services provided by the state, the slack gets taken up by private households. All these costs, as they’re cut away from the state and corporations [get] moved to the private household. There’s a strong ideological push to make family, marriage, and the private household the proper, moral place to do this kind of social support."

But most people are unaware of this connection between gay marriage and economic issues.

Priya Kandaswamy, an assistant professor of women’s studies at Portland State University, argues that government policies that punish single mothers and promote a heterosexual two-parent family were enacted to control the lives of people of color in particular, and are part of a larger political and structural shift that the mainstream gay movement is unconsciously incorporating into its politics.

"In the mid ’90s, when the U.S. welfare system was dramatically reorganized, the image of single, black mothers with bad family values was frequently invoked to justify cutting assistance to working class people in this country. So, when the same-sex marriage movement takes up this same language of ‘good families are
two-parent families,’ i.e. families that have a certain kind of economic status, they are implicitly reinforcing our assumptions about what it means to be in a single-parent family or a family that is not as economically well off.”

These government policies, Kandaswamy argues, were similar to the Christian right ideology, which “constantly invokes the idea of marriage as foundational to the family and to the nation. It’s striking when gays and lesbians start to use the same language and says a lot about who they are trying to appeal to.”

Race and Class in the LGBT movement

Some believe that it is the race and class divisions within the LGBT movement that lead to single issue policies like gay marriage.

“The landscape of LGBT organizations is pretty polarized,” says Duggan, “There are national organizations—basically structured around private fundraising—which have prioritized marriage equality. They don’t have constituencies, they’re not grassroots, they don’t mobilize. And, they tend to be dominated by prosperous white people. Many grassroots organizations, usually locally based, have a different structure and different politics.”

“In New York City, queer groups predominantly made up of people of color, such as the Audre Lorde Project, Queers for Economic Justice, and FIERCE, tend to prioritize around poverty, racism, immigration, health care, retirement, and violence on the street,” Duggan observes.

Health and Housing Loses to Marriage

Critics of the gay marriage movement believe that it has taken funding away from other critical needs for queer people. Leslie Ewing, who worked from 2004-08 at San Francisco’s Lyon-Martin Health Care, the only freestanding community clinic in California providing health care specifically to trans, lesbian, and bisexual women, notes that she was often unable to get funding for issues affecting poor lesbians and transpeople from those same funders who were more than happy to fund gay marriage. “As a queer community, we have to look at issues that affect all of us, not just some of us,” she argues, “and not just issues that are lucrative for fundraising.”

Brian Bassinger, executive director of the San Francisco AIDS Housing Coalition, which works with homeless and low-income people with AIDS, claims that “the gay marriage movement took the air out of the AIDS movement, as well as the funding. While we as a community were fighting for gay marriage, the
Governor decimated the state’s Office of AIDS!

When Bassinger heard that $43 million were spent on Proposition 8, which he feels was “such a narrow agenda for such a small part of the population,” he was livid because “at the same time, they were cutting $85 million in HIV/AIDS care in the state of California. They eliminated funding for housing, including residential care facilities for the chronically ill.” But the response in the LGBT community was negligible.

Bassinger and his partner are both HIV positive and on disability funding. If they were to get married they would lose their SSI and SSDI benefits. And his situation is not uncommon.

“The majority of people with HIV and AIDS in San Francisco are living in extreme poverty,” says Bassinger. “There’s this mythology that gay men are wealthy. The reality is that gay men living in poverty are twice the national average. We are poor. And poor people see marriage equality as a middle class and upper class issue.”

Tommi Avicolli Mecca, a long time queer activist who now works in housing rights in San Francisco, argues “If we as a movement are not going to be fighting for housing and jobs, food, and basic essentials like health care, then I’m not sure what we stand for as a movement.”

“According to a study done by the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force in conjunction with the National Coalition of Homelessness, 45-50 percent of homeless youth in America are queer or trans,” Mecca points out. “In San Francisco, the number is considered to be about 30 percent. Now, those numbers are way above what is considered the percentage of queers in the population, i.e. 10 percent. And that’s scary. I think that that should be a wake-up call for our movement, but it hasn’t been.”

Spade is not convinced that the mainstream LGBT movement is really concerned about the survival and basic needs of queer and trans people in California. “If they were,” he argues, “their top priority would have been to deal with the violence against queer and trans people, immigration detention in California, and the massive criminal punishment system in California.”

“As the racial wealth divide grows in the United States,” he continues, “you’ll have an agenda that’s going to benefit the people with the most privilege. And the vast majority of the people are certain to be left in the same or a worse position because they don’t even have solidarity with other people in their community anymore!”

Kenyon Farrow, executive director of Queers for Economic Justice, a grassroots group in New York City, believes that the queer community ought to be focusing on issues that would go a long way towards protecting the lives of queer and transgender folks. “I absolutely think housing for poor, homeless, and low-income queer folks is a huge issue for us, as is doing anti-violence work,” he says. “HIV/AIDS is still a huge issue and [perhaps] more broadly, the question of what the healthcare reform package means to the LGBT community.”

Kandaswamy believes that if mainstream lesbian and gay organizations are interested in working towards racial justice, they need to take on issues like the criminal justice system. “They should think about the fact that people of color—including queer people of color—are incarcerated at incredibly high rates in this country,” she says. “They need to think about racist immigration policies and racial disparities in economic security in this country. Racial justice is not about bringing a few people into an organization to represent the interests of queer people of color. It’s
about being willing to do political work that betters the lives of queer people of color in all dimensions of their lives.”

The consensus among marriage equality critics seems to be that if we had taken the $43 million spent on the failed Prop 8 effort and really invested it in a broader LGBT social justice movement, we could have sustained a change for all kinds of vulnerable people—such as, preventing new HIV infections among young African Americans.

Fighting Homophobia Is not Enough

Some argue that although gay marriage does not benefit many in the LGBT community, focusing on it has reduced homophobia for all queers. But as Joseph DeFilippis, former executive director of Queers for Economic Justice points out, “When homophobia is your only target, its removal will only benefit people for whom it was the sole issue. If you’re homeless and a person of color, or a person of color who is an immigrant and queer, getting rid of homophobia doesn’t change the immigration battles you face, or the racism you have to contend with, or your struggle to pay for your apartment!”

To DeFilippis, the focus on gay marriage isn’t just a difference of opinion but the result of an underlying racism, which he believes can take many forms. “Sometimes you’re aware of being racist but most times you’re not,” he says, adding that institutional racism is much more potent. “What it means is that you are completely ignoring certain people’s lives, their issues, their agendas, and taking money away from what affects their lives.”

One can only hope that some day we will have an open dialogue about what the agenda should be for all LGBT people. And when it happens, one hopes that the voices of the poor, the disabled, the feminists, and the queers of color will be heard, so that we end up with an agenda that is more reflective of the progressive politics that ignited the Stonewall riots and led to the modern gay liberation movement—a movement that seems very far from where we are today.

Lisa Dettmer is a producer of the Women’s Magazine radio program at KPFA in Berkeley, California. This article is based on a radio documentary produced by Lisa Dettmer and Elena Botkin-Levy. A special thanks to the Astraea Foundation and Making Contact at the National Radio Project for their financial support in making this documentary possible.