

“SEXUAL OUTLAWS”

Barry D. Adam

Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, translated from the French by Daniella Dangoor, London: Allison & Busby, 1978, pp. 144.

Hocquenghem's *Homosexual Desire* was originally published in Europe at the same time Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*¹ appeared in the English-speaking world. With Altman, *Homosexual Desire* presents the first modern theoretical *tour de force* devoted to wresting reflection upon homosexual existence from heterosexist presumptions. Long the preserve of psychiatrists and other moral entrepreneurs, commentary on gay people has typically remained imprisoned in an ideological straitjacket analogous to the Jim Crow “scholarship” which so long bedevilled blacks.² The first flourish of scholarly gay self-reflection follows on the advent of the gay liberation movement. This scholarship is an unabashed challenge to the taken-for-granted order of family, gender and intimacy. Hocquenghem remarks in his opening words that *Homosexual Desire* is an investigation of the “phantasies and ratiocinations of the heterosexual world on the subject of ‘homosexuality’” (p. 35).

The book is founded in Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's³ onslaught upon psychiatry's reduction of the world to the sociodynamics of the nuclear family. *Homosexual Desire* develops a polemic against the enforced “oedipalization” of homosexuality by scholarly traditions and the public mind. In a series of brilliant exposés, Hocquenghem demonstrates that relegation of homosexuality to the “ontological darkness of the ‘unnatural,’ the ‘deviant,’ and the ‘pathological’”⁴ reveals only the paranoid delusions of the heterosexist mind and nothing about homosexuality. Homosexuality is no more than the realization of a universal human potential; its degradation by classical psychoanalysis, the mass media, police reports and judicial proceedings constitutes the problem. Drawing on French evidence, Hocquenghem remarks that “the law is clearly a system of desire, in which provocation and voyeurism have their own place” (p. 52). Who can doubt the claim when the RCMP routinely employs sophisticated electronic surveillance to overcome darkness and physical inaccessibility in order to spy upon sexual rendezvous among men in public parks?⁵ Such practices are also

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commonplace in the United States and in both western and eastern Europe. Hocquenghem's cast of paranoid French mayors, prosecutors, doctors and journalists is paralleled on this continent; for example: California Senator John Briggs, who pushed for the elimination of schoolworkers who are gay or condoned gay people; Anita Bryant's crusade to "Protect America's Children"; the *Toronto Sun's* Claire Hoy and the campaign to suppress the *Body Politic*. As soon as homosexuality becomes mentionable, popular prejudice can be turned to profit.

Hocquenghem wants to understand homosexuality in its own terms and explore its implications for conventional understandings of gender, social hierarchy and eroticism. This book is less interesting in the answers it provides, than in the questions it poses: what happens to male privilege when the phallic signifier is dethroned by the desiring use of the anus? "Only the phallus dispenses identity: any social use of the anus, apart from its sublimated use, creates the risk of a loss of identity. Seen from behind we are all women; the anus does not practise sexual discrimination" (p. 87). What is this unique social formation without generations or biological reproduction which nevertheless never lacks members? "Homosexual production takes place according to a mode of nonlimitative horizontal relations, heterosexual reproduction according to one of hierarchical succession" (p. 95). How is polyvocal desire subdivided into homo- and heterosexuality and forced into the Procrustean bed of Oedipal relations? Would an end to anti-homosexual paranoia necessarily reorganize repressive institutions which seem to require homophobia for their perpetuation? "We find the greatest charge of latent homosexuality in those social machines which are particularly anti-homosexual — the army, the school, the church, sport, etc." (p. 58)

Homosexual relations challenge the ideological legitimations of patriarchy which declare the Oedipal structure of the family as biological, gender roles as genetic, and the subordination of women as universal. Gay social organization opens a radical alternative to sexuality confined to the nexus of dominant and submissive, active and passive, subject and object, male and female. In Hocquenghem's words: "what is repressed in [male] homosexuals is not the love of woman as a particular sexual object but the entire subject-object system which constitutes an oppression of desire" (p. 125).

The book is innovative, seminal, provocative, but not without conceptual problems. The French structuralists peel away the layers of civilization to find Rousseau standing on his head. There appears to be no "ego," "individual," or "subject," only a natural substratum of "polyvocal, non-personalised relations among organs," the decoded flux of desire, an anti-humanist destruction of the subject. It is an irony of this book that the everyday life of gay people, their material existence, self-conceptions and aspirations are largely ignored in order that homosexuality may be appropriated as the

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symbol of this natural substratum. Hocquenghem becomes the philosophical counterpart to John Rechy's bleak world of an anarchy of impersonal couplings.⁶ Homosexual expression is constrained, according to this text, to two alternatives: submission to repressive heterosexual forms or the “abyss of nonpersonalised and uncodified desire . . . desire as the plugging in of organs subject to no rule or law” (p. 81). Hocquenghem's “desire” is a reified perpetual motion machine without antecedents or form.⁷

Despite their self-presentation as revolutionaries, both Hocquenghem's and Rechy's “sexual outlaws” are suspiciously compliant with the morality of capitalism — its “artificial reterritorializations of decoded flows” (to use French structuralist jargon). Sex becomes yet one more specialized compartment of life in a social system which fragments the person into a series of separate social roles. Sex becomes another commodity in a society where everything, including people, can be reduced to well-packaged consumer items. Sex acquires the “virtues” demanded for survival in the capitalist market system: emotional repression, competitiveness, manipulation. Hocquenghem believes this “plugging in of organs” is the “mode of existence of desire itself” (p. 118). The humanization of sexuality is dismissed as an anachronism: “It is no use trying to turn the clock back” (p. 130).

As a serious attempt to raise fundamental issues of sexual organization, this book merits a wide readership.

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Notes

1. Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey, 1971.
2. Cf. Barry D. Adam, *The Survival of Domination: Inferiorization and Everyday Life*, New York: Elsevier, 1978, Ch. 2.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated from the French by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen Lane, New York: Viking, 1972, 1977.
4. Adam, *The Survival of Domination*, p. 34.
5. Cf. “Hidden Cameras Nab 80 in Park Washroom,” *Body Politic*, No. 47, October, 1978, p. 9.
6. John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary*, New York: Dell, 1977.
7. Barry D. Adam, “Freedom from Psychiatry,” *Body Politic*, No. 51, March/April, 1979, p. 36.