

R E V I E W

The Homosexualization of America

THE PITFALLS OF TIMING

Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualization of America*, Beacon, 1982.

by Terry Miller

Dennis Altman is a victim of bad timing. Here we have this very bright, well schooled, humanitarian, politically conscious gay man who wrote a masterpiece of gay liberation analysis, and the poor devil finished it just before the news of AIDS and our realization of

its incredible implications. One wonders what he would have done with AIDS; he obviously did not know of it while writing; there's no discussion of AIDS or Kaposi's Sarcoma in the otherwise thorough book.

The Homosexualization of America, published by Beacon Press in 1982, and probably written in 1980, is a completely accessible, lucid, and enjoyable synthesis of a variety of gay questions. Altman shares Edmund White's contradiction as an upperclass socialist commentator. *The Homosexualization* is more polished and reads better than White's *States of Desire*, but Altman has the advantage of having published *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* a decade earlier. He's had ten years to address himself to gay liberation, a time in which to think critically about his earlier work, a process he acknowledges.

The Homosexualization of America is a slick academic sized paperback, 224 pages,

divided in seven chapters, with a striking red cover and tasteful paper and typeface. Beacon classifies it as "Sociology/Gay Studies." It is a pop book, very readable in the tradition of *I'm OK You're OK* without being simplistic in the least. Anyone interested in thinking about gay liberation today and over the last decade would enjoy this book, whether they're new to such thinking, or a master at it.

Altman begins with a chapter entitled, "The Invention of the New Homosexual," in which he seems to be rather amazed that people with homosexual preference have come to be considered a minority group. He says this is easier in America than in Europe or Latin America, where people are identified, and identify themselves, as members of a class or ideological position. In America, Altman argues, we are much more familiar with classification by interest. "The greatest single victory of the gay movement over the past decade has been to shift the debate from behavior to identity," thus forcing opponents to attack citizens' rights rather than citizens' behaviors.

The next chapter bears the title, "Homosexuals and Homosexuality: The Problems of Definition." In this chapter, Altman fleshes out some of his comments in the first chapter. He apparently holds most respect for a view of homosexuality as a polymorphous term describing a part of all people. As such, he finds that the term "homosexual" is a sociological one, describing a chosen or assigned identity rather than an orientation. This identification poses dangers as well as bringing benefits — while it allows us to develop a positive image, it allows the society at large to control us by classifying us. The chapter constitutes a marvelous review of social scientific and historical views of homosexuality, including the impact on gender roles, and a discussion of the roots of homoerophobia, and Freud's theory of sublimated homosexuality as the basis of male social organization.

In chapter three, "Sex and the Triumph of Consumer Capitalism," Altman examines the modern bathhouse, or tubs if you prefer. Initially, he expected increased liberation and opening of sexual choice to eliminate outlets such as the baths, but finds instead that street cruising is dropping off compared to sex palace activity. He wonders aloud about some of the causes, bringing in the feminist analysis of pornography as commerce in so much meat.

Altman's fourth chapter is "The Movement and Its Enemies," but he might have more aptly left "enemies" out of the title, as he gives them little space. He reviews why gay liberation is political, runs briefly through modern gay movement history since Magnus Hirshfield in pre-Nazi Germany, and finally

applauds the fact that the movement is diverse, with unresolved issues such as man/boy love; indeed, he is strongly critical of those who see gay liberation as a monolithic force. Finally, he contrasts two traditions in gay political organizing: on the one hand the radical-minded confrontational street demonstrators, and on the other the upperclass, elitist, behind-the-scenes movers and shakers.

Chapter five is an overview of gay culture: its development, current state, forms, and leading thinkers. His final substantive chapter is "Sexual Freedom and the End of Romance," which is not quite the reactionary work that it sounds. Altman is a little out of his element here; he identifies himself as something of a tourist in promiscuity. At the same time, he is not an apologist. In fact, he argues that since homosexual contact is entirely unrelated to procreation, that it is "promiscuous" by its very nature, and responsible for a visible challenge to, and a resultant change in American sexual mores. He runs through some marvelous feminist critiques on topics such as man/boy love, toilet sex, sado-masochism and pornography. One by one he walks through each issue, examining how it might be construed as political, and how it effects gay identity.

The homosexualization of America refers presumably to the changes in society's sexual mores, as well as the growing status as he sees it, of sex as a commodity. Taken alone, his analyses are very astute. The book is not exclusively male; he attends to lesbian feminist analyses, although, since he is a man, from a respectful distance.

Much has been written about changing gay lifestyles since AIDS. One can only wonder what position Altman would have taken on AIDS related issues. Is promiscuity going away? If so, what's up for heterosexual morality regarding sex as a procreative act? What will be the impact on the polymorphous theory of homosexual desire? On homoerophobia? Will America continue its homosexualization? These are all questions which are absolutely central today and which the book is of no help in solving. Nonetheless, as a basic treatment of modern gay liberation, *The Homosexualization of America* is indispensable.

Terry Miller is a local activist, and is leading a course in several of the issues mentioned above. Details are elsewhere in this issue.



changes

Just Out is going monthly. Effective this issue **Just Out** will publish the 4th Friday of each month.

Subscribers will still receive 26 issues of the paper, and advertisers who have signed contracts which list specific dates will have their contracts extended at the same special rate.

Not much else will change. **Just Out** will still be distributed free, and we'll still provide the same news, articles, and features as we have for the past year. The **Out About Town** section of the paper will contain a month's worth of events, and a more detailed theatre listing will be incorporated into the format.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

October 26 — Politics and more.

Discussion of the candidates, and the issues, along with a **Just Out** voters guide.


It's also our 1 year anniversary. We'll recap the year, and plan for the future. Deadline October 15th

November 23 - Winter style, and Holiday Gift Guide.

Deadline November 12th.

December 28 — Books, books and more books. **Just Out** proclaims January "Curl Up With a Good Book Month." Deadline December 17th.

January 25 — Cuisine Scene — The A to Z's of the cuisine scene in Portland. Deadline January 14th.



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