

# NATURE OR NURTURE

Sponsored by the International Lesbian and Gay Association and held in Amsterdam, the international conference titled Homosexuality Beyond Disease focussed on mental health, politics and law.

BY MARK SCHOOLS

Our "layer of civilization" is still very thin, cautioned the deputy mayor of Amsterdam at the opening ceremonies of the international conference titled "Homosexuality Beyond Disease." But the deputy mayor's warning sounded almost out of place and unnecessary. After all, the conference had attracted more than 200 academics and professionals from at least four continents as well as a whole battery of high-ranking Dutch officials. And with the conference taking place in Amsterdam's poshest hotel, directly across from the Royal Palace, it was easy to believe that Holland's tolerance was the rule, not the

exception. However, events have transpired in other countries which show that most of the world has not passed beyond the conception of homosexuality as a disease; these events charged the conference with a sense of urgency.

Sponsored by the International Lesbian and Gay Association and organized by the Gay and Lesbian Studies Department of the University of Utrecht, the conference ran from Dec. 10 through 12 and focused on one particularly threadbare layer of civilization: the World Health Organization's (WHO) classification of homosexuality as a diseased mental condition. This classification has been used to rationalize a

multitude of injustices, from electroshock therapy in the past to modern immigration laws. Two segments of the conference, "Homosexuality and Mental Health" and "Theories of Homosexuality," criticized the illness model of homosexuality and proposed more humane and scientific understandings. The third segment of the conference, "Homosexuality: Politics and Law," explored strategies for aligning government policy with these new understandings.

Professor Joop van Londen, president of the WHO's parliamentary body, gave a lecture which stressed the positive prospects for the future. Although the WHO's next disease classification manual will not be formally adopted until 1993, it is already being field tested — and the proposed manual does not list homosexuality as an illness. "There are no scientific reasons whatsoever to call homosexuality a disease," van Londen stated.

"But health is more than the absence of disease," he continued. Health includes leading a full cultural life, and if societies allow homophobia to persist, then these societies risk injuring the mental health of their lesbian and gay citizens. Van Londen concluded by proposing that governments go beyond mere tolerance and set an example for their populations by becoming "homo-friendly."

Every lecturer agreed that culture influences the expressions of one's sexuality, whether homosexual or heterosexual, but disagreement raged over the power and profundity of that influence. Most of the debate centered around the terms "essentialism" and "constructionalism," five-dollar words that mean, basically, nature and nurture. Is homosexuality an inborn, essential feature of a person's nature? Or is it instead a construct built through the interaction of an individual with his or her environment?

The question is an old one, and emotionally charged. Many people oppose even asking it, on the fear that if a cause for homosexuality is found, those in power will use that knowledge to eliminate gay people forever. *Journal of Homosexuality* editor John De Cecco did not actually condemn the inquiry, but he did voice the caveat on the minds of many at the conference: "The laboratory is never as far from the ovens of World War II as one might like to think."

The lecturers well understood this connection, and did not focus so much on looking for a cause as on how particular people in particular cultures come to identify themselves. Professor Vern Bullough of the United States outlined a history of theories about homosexuality and noted that the word — and therefore the very concept — "homosexuality" is barely one hundred years old.

This is not to say that before the late nineteenth century women did not have sex with women or men with men. Rather, the lecturers stressed the extravagant differences between how people who have same-gender sexual relations have thought of themselves. In a talk during the pre-conference, Töre Håkansson of Sweden reported that many Native American tribes revered "berdaches," men who cross-dressed and had sexual relations with other men. However, both Håkansson and Professor Terry Tafoya, a Taos Pueblo Indian from the United States, pointed out that this statement misrepresents the berdache. Even though berdaches were what we would consider biological males, they and their cultures con-

sidered them members of a third gender. Hence, a berdache never engaged in sex with another berdache — only with male-identified men or, in some cultures, with female-identified women. The point is that what modern Westerners may view as "homosexuality" is given a completely different interpretation by those involved.

Tafoya compared the Western model of the homosexual-heterosexual continuum to a stick. According to our way of understanding, no matter what your sexuality — homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual — you are still somewhere on the stick. We need to conceptualize human identity in terms of a circle, Tafoya asserted, for in contrast to a stick a circle has no endpoints. A circle is a metaphor for the whole. Therefore people are not stuck between only two possibilities, but free to be any of an infinite number of identities.

Although these theories seem to veer off into the abstract, their consequences are real. Western AIDS researchers often ask health officials of Third World nations about the incidence of homosexuality, only to be met with indignant denials. According to Tafoya, Dutch educator Jan Husken and others, these officials may well be telling the truth — as they see it. Husken related his own lively example. After having sex with a Moroccan man, Husken asked his partner about homosexuality in Morocco. "There is none," his partner replied. "Well," Husken said, "what about us?" "That's not the same thing," countered the Moroccan. "We're friends."

Erotic friendship or homosexuality? Or berdache of a third sex? The answer depends on your cultural point of reference.

Unless you are a member of the essentialist camp. They will tell you that, indeed, the ways in which one expresses his or her sexual orientation can vary widely. Nevertheless, that orientation constitutes an essential and unalterable feature of a person's make-up. After all, homosexuality in some form has existed in every culture, in all places and in all times. If homosexuality were culturally bound, then we would expect it not to appear in certain societies, especially those like our own which strongly condemn it.

Although not himself a strict essentialist, Dr. Kenneth Plummer of the United Kingdom pointed out that constructionist theories simply do not resonate with the experiences of lesbians and gay men. Studying the biographies of lesbians and gay men reveals over and over that gay people knew they were homosexual early in their lives. Usually children's vocabularies lack the word "gay" or "homosexual"; hence "different" is used most often to describe the feeling of growing up gay. "I knew that somehow I was different from other boys and girls" is a theme whose variations recur in thousands of life stories, and essentialist proponents cite this common theme to cast doubt upon theories claiming that homosexuality is socio-psychologically constructed.

Whether one believes that being gay is a matter of nature or nurture, the real task, according to Dr. Michael Ross of Australia, is to understand our own paradigms and their consequences. The way science thinks about gay people profoundly influences the way gay people think about themselves.

In the past, gay and lesbian scientists have tended merely to react to old negative models: homosexuality is not a sin or a sickness, they

## Freedom is a dangerous choice

BY MARK SCHOOLS

One by one they were shoved out of the bar and into the crowded street and the glare of television lights. Terrified of being recognized, the women shielded their faces with their hands or covered their heads with sweaters or jackets.

The crowd mocked and jeered at the women who were being arrested, and gave leering comments and whistles to any woman who was wearing a skirt. Even the television camera harassed the women in skirts, zooming in for close-ups of the shapeliest bare legs.

The film was a Peruvian news clip of a police raid on a lesbian bar in Lima. It served as a vivid demonstration of the realities of homophobia. Rebecca Seville, a Peruvian lesbian activist who was arrested at the disco, gave a presentation at the Amsterdam Conference which told what the film did not show.

When the police raided the bar on June 6, 1987, they kept 70 women trapped inside for more than an hour until a television crew arrived, whereupon the police forced the women out of the disco. In Peru, attitudes toward homosexuality are vehemently hostile, so most of the women were terrified of being recognized by their friends, employers or, especially, families. The television station aired the video clip three times: twice that week and once again after the feminist movement in Peru wrote a letter protesting the homophobic attitudes of the television station.

The women had to endure other forms of abuse as well. While they were being led to the police bus, they were not only verbally mocked and degraded, but shoved and hit. Some were thrown to the ground. When they arrived at the police station, their troubles were far from over. There they were sexually harassed and detained until 1 a.m. At that time they were given the choice of leaving or being transferred to the custody of the police division against terrorism.

In this case, freedom was a dangerous choice. Lima was then under a standing curfew enforced from 1 until 5 a.m. Anyone caught on the street between those hours was shot on sight. In spite of the danger, most of the women chose to leave and hide or sit near the police station until the curfew broke.

No one took legal action after the raid because Peru does not recognize the right to have homosexual relations. Attempting legal redress probably would have accomplished nothing other than to incite legal and social reprisals from a government infamous for its human-rights violations.

Some of the women — in concert with the lesbian-rights organization in Lima, Grupo de Autoconciencia de Lesbianas Feministas (GALF) — wrote letters of protest to the government. These letters, as well as GALF's other activities, represent important first steps of the inchoate lesbian and gay rights movement in Peru. The participants in the Amsterdam conference, deeply moved by the sight of the women cowering from the television cameras, sent a collective letter of protest to the president of Peru. GALF requests others to do the same; send a copy to GALF as well.

GALF suggests the following text:

Nos dirigimos a usted con la finalidad de expresarle nuestra preocupación frente a los hechos ocurridos el día 06 de junio de 1987 en el local ubicado en el Jr. Huaraz 518 — Breña:

La detención ilegal de 70 ciudadanas quienes fueron puestas en libertad y obligadas a transitar sin protección alguna durante las horas del toque de queda poniendo en peligro sus vidas; la actitud defamatoria del Canal 2 de televisión pues su versión periodística no se ajusta a la realidad. Por tanto le solicitamos:

- Respeto al derecho de reunión de las personas sin discriminación alguna debido a su orientación sexual
- Investigación y sanción a los efectivos policiales responsables de estos hechos.
- Respeto al derecho de honor e imagen consagrados en vuestra constitución de parte de los medios de comunicación.

Translation:

We address you with the purpose of expressing our concern about the events that occurred on June 6, 1987 in the establishment located at 518 Juarez — Breña:

The illegal detention of 70 women who were set free and forced to leave the premises of the police station without any protection whatsoever during the curfew, thus putting their lives in danger; and also the news coverage by channel 2 of the event which not only was defamatory but also did not do justice to the truth.

For these reasons we call for:

- The free association of people without discrimination, regardless of their sexual orientation.
- The investigation and sanction of the police responsible for these actions.
- Media respect for the rights of honor and self-dignity enshrined in your constitution.

Addresses:

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