

Homosexuals and the American tradition

Autor(en): **Pedersen, Lyn**

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Already you see I have escaped from you.
For it is not for what I have put into it that I have
 written this book,
Nor is it by reading it you will acquire it,
Nor do those know me best who admire me and
 vauntingly praise me,
Nor will the candidates for my love (unless at most
 a very few) prove victorious,
Nor will my poems do good only, they will do just as
 much evil, perhaps more,
For all is useless without that which you may guess at
 many times and not hit, that which I hinted at;
Therefore release me and depart on your way.

Homosexuals and the American Tradition

By Lyn Pedersen, Associate Editor, ONE

Americans often regard the concept of liberty as an American invention, conceived in 1620 and fully matured by 1776, after which there was little new to be said on the subject.

Perhaps this naive view of a theme that has actually run all through the world's history can throw fresh light on a basic contradiction in American tradition — a contradiction of great importance to homosexuals. American history has revolved about the constant struggle between liberty and repression — yet, the notion of liberty is so basic to American thinking that its opponents must disguise their attacks and pretend to be defenders of liberty, while its actual defenders must seek constant redefinition of the concept to rescue it from the jingoists.

America has outgrown previous repressive periods. But the increasing complexity and compactness of American life and above all our emergence as a nation committed to the notion of saving the world (whether or not the world approves) have encouraged restrictive forces in all aspects of our life. The spread of governmental authority, militarization, McCarthyism and the paranoia of a nation up against an implacable enemy threaten to swamp the basic propensity for individualism and liberty.

Intimidation has gone a long way. But the intimidated often react with new assertions of the libertarian spirit. Americans recall that their greatest liberal upsurges came fullblown out of periods quite as repressive as this. And some elements in the current situation show a growth of freedoms.

One particular authoritarianism, the Puritan bias, has been famous in American tradition. The Puritan notion that the faithful have a duty to

force moral cramps on society has vitiated our law and our customs, and spawned much prejudice and fury.

This particularly has affected homosexuals, for in the world as conceived in the Puritan mind, homosexuality doesn't exist. When faced with the actual condition, the Puritan sees it as some diabolic creation which must be quickly extirpated. And today, when the Puritan label is a term of opprobrium in advanced circles, the Puritan bias against homosexuals continues to motivate many liberals who would bitterly resent being called Puritans.

Yet while the pure-minded have generally regarded homosexuality as virtually nonexistent in America, there is no reason to suppose it was formerly less common than Kinsey has proven it to be in the present — a fact many polite Americans still prefer to disbelieve.

Our foremost poet of freedom was well known as homosexual, despite his routine denial. Conjecture by critics regarding Poe and Melville is common. George Washington Carver, first contemporary hero of the American Negro, covered an open secret, desperately guarded by his associates. And some writers have suggested our first president was in love with Alexander Hamilton. One newspaper publisher has dared the courts to charge him with libel in order to be able to introduce evidence to substantiate his charge that Senator McCarthy, who first gained fame attacking homosexuals in the State Department, is himself homosexual.

Surely homosexuality could not have been absent from the masculine society of our frontier days. Men with strong family instincts would not as likely have gone off alone or with other men to the wilds. We still hear stories about what cowboys, hoboes or lumberjacks did to relieve their sex urges. Here again, it would seem unlikely that all of those who chose an all-male society were strictly heterosexual.

The fight for Literary Realism, that occupied America's best novelists during the first quarter of this century, began to lift the veil on the unmentionable subject, and such as Theodore Dreiser, Willa Cather and Sinclair Lewis began introducing occasional homosexual characters. Their works were often met with censorship. A full-scale restrictive crusade was spearheaded by the NEW YORK SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE. Radclyffe Hall's novel had its day in the American Courts, and ultimately was cleared, as the higher courts insisted that restriction of literature was legal only when material was obviously salacious in intent, the salacious elements outweighing literary or scientific values, or when the material was such as to stimulate the average reader sexually. Many jurists feltt even this too restrictive, but at least the right to discuss the tabooed materials had been established.

The popularization of psychoanalysis, reaching its peak in America during the recent war, and the shock of Kinsey's revelations, combined with further developments in Realist literature to heighten popular concern with the problems of sex. Novelists, abandoning the political idealism of the Thirties, turned more to sex for inspiration.

And in the very period when much of American life was becoming

more restrictive, it became fashionable for periodicals to print articles (sometimes, even rational) on homosexuality. Research Foundations, Universities, Psychological Clinics and sometimes. State Legislative Committees or Penal Institutions began to make studies of homosexuality — occasionally with open minds. Groups like the Henry Foundation in New York tried to help homosexuals «in trouble with themselves, the law or society.»

More recently, groups like the Mattachine Foundation and ONE, Incorporated, both started in Los Angeles, were set up by homosexuals for the purpose of helping homosexuals as a group to find a respected and responsible place in society through the development of minority consciousness and culture. ONE has just recently begun attracting unfavorable attentions from various Republican Senators.

But the Mattachine (now seeming on its last legs), ONE and the Henry Foundation, and similar ventures, are small organizations in a very large country — small groups protesting in their various ways against the general pattern.

Homosexual acts are illegal in most parts of the United States, and various, generally severe, penalties are attached. In most cities, homosexual gathering places are under constant police surveillance. Blackmail is common, often carried on by the police themselves. In many places, all known homosexuals are rounded up for questioning every time any sort of sex crime has been committed. The pattern varies. A few cities have relatively liberal reputations, but few homosexuals dare become too public about their natures. Election campaigns often set off waves of homosexual baiting. Los Angeles is typical of the cities where police persecution of homosexuals has become «a fine art.» Handsome officers are planted in likely places about the city as «lures» to tempt the unwary into revealing themselves — and facing arrest. A recent California law requires that all «sex offenders» carry registration cards.

The quality of the legislative studies should be the weathervane for the American temper on sex variations. But this temper is hard to judge, since studies from different states show surprisingly different humors. Where one study takes a liberal view, another will recommend the castration of all deviants. Often as not, such studies are prompted, and their conclusions dictated, by newspaper hysteria over some sex crime which probably had nothing to do with homosexuality.

It has become standard procedure, when some old man rapes an infant girl, for the press to decry the homosexual menace and call for drastic measures.

Recently in Miami, a Florida beach resort, an alleged homosexual was murdered by a pair of confessed robbers. Quickly a chorus of police officials, newspapermen, clergymen and ambitious politicians alarmed the town about the invasion by hordes of presumably predatory homosexuals. (See ONE, Oct., Nov., Dec., 1954). The wildest sorts of local ordinances were put forward to rid the town of homosexuals. The pattern was more hysterical than the similar outcry in England a year ago.

Our notorious Senator McCarthy has already demonstrated, if any proof was needed, how a demagogue can ride to fame and power by unprincipled attacks on misunderstood minority groups. And McCarthy has demonstrated his understanding of the fact that it is no longer prudent for American politicians (except in the South) to be openly anti-Semitic or anti-Negro — with America's pretensions in the international field.

Actual communists are pretty rare in the United States, and their denunciation is such a unanimous chorus, that politicians are on the look-out for «new game.» It would seem that the homosexual minority offers an opportunity to venal office-seekers fully as exploitable as anti-semitism was for the Nazis. Many homosexuals in America feel that the current purge in Miami is a preview for the national scene.

Yet how this thesis contrasts with the facts presented earlier in this article indicating that liberty for American homosexuals was expanding. The truth is that we are in a period when conflicting currents are pushing in all directions. We are too close to the pattern.

This is a turning point for America. We are, in Arnold's phrase, «poised on the top of one huge wave of fate . . .» We can only be sure that homosexuals as a group are becoming more openly important in American life. If America moves toward a sort of fascism, then it seems quite likely that homosexuals will be among the chief scapegoats.

And if America regains the status of a free, an open society . . . Then it is certain that the homosexual will be one of the primary tests of that freedom. Only a reaffirmation of the right of the individual to a private life could lift America out of its present morass of suspicion and fear. Only the return to the notion that freedom includes the right to do that which is considered heinous could give «the American dream» solid meaning again, and lift it above the sham of patriotic oratory.

America as a whole now suffers severely from paranoia, and in countries as well as individuals, paranoia is a state closely related to suppressed homosexuality. Public attitudes here toward masculinity and effeminacy have much to do with America's confused role in world politics. I think it not extreme to say that a national therapy is necessary in regard to American attitudes toward sex — nor do I consider such a possibility too far-fetched.

America may well be the first modern country to try on a grand scale to find out just what homosexuality is about, and to give the homosexual a place in society. In doing so, the nation may well find its own path to psychological health.