THE THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE
OF THE ARGUMENTS OF THE GAY
LIBERATION MOVEMENT, 1969-1981

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# CONTENTS

Summary

Declaration

Acknowledgements  

Introduction  

1. Theoretical Arguments of the Early Gay Liberation Movement  

2. The Repression Hypothesis: Altman, Hocquenghem and Mieli  

3. Psychoanalytic Issues  

4. Approaches to Male Homosexuality Within Sociology  

5. Historical Issues  

6. Conclusion: An Approach to the Social Theory of Male Homosexuality in Terms of Gender  

Bibliography
SUMMARY

The gay liberation movement affirmed a defiant, new identity for homosexual people and vigorously detailed their oppression. It paid particular attention to psychiatry and sought to shift the question of mental illness from the homosexual to society. Gay liberationists initially explored three major avenues in order to define the sources of oppression. The first drew upon the feminist critique of gender, but this provided a unitary conception of masculinity which proved impossible to apply precisely to the gender identities and the social position of homosexual men. The second explored a Marxist explanation of oppression, and a consideration of this raises a number of issues concerning the ability of Marxism to incorporate questions of sexuality without any theoretical attention being given to itself.

The third attempt was a form of Freudo-Marxism by which gay liberationists posited sexual repression as a general feature of capitalist societies. This was elaborated by Altman, Hoquenghem and Mieli who sought to derive a social psychology from psychoanalytic theory. Their arguments located an original homosexuality in infantile sexuality.

Since gay liberationist theory has not addressed psychoanalysis in any detail, it is important to assess the repression hypothesis in terms of Freud's own work. A consideration of his postulate of bisexuality, and of his struggle with the question of gender differentiation, suggests that the origins of both homosexuality and heterosexuality lie in the tensions which characterise the construction of the boy's masculinity. They are different outcomes of the ways in which the boy comes to recognise the opposition between the sexes, an opposition which is socially grounded in their anatomical distinction. With some reformulations, Freud provides a valuable account of the origins of male homosexuality.
Apart from the gay movement, the other major efforts to conceptualise male homosexuality in social terms have been made by sociologists. The orthodox structural-functionalism view shares some of the problems encountered by the early gay liberationist arguments. The bulk of the more liberal statements are purely descriptive. But a certain amount of sociological work has achieved some important insights. Plummer, in particular, used the interactionist perspective to demonstrate that both a homosexual identity and subculture are thoroughly shaped by hostile social reactions. However, his account leaves the questions of the psychological and historical constraints upon the negotiation of sexual meanings.

Weeks explored these historical questions and he isolated the late nineteenth century in Britain as the crucial period of the categorisation of the homosexual as a particular type of person. His work raises important issues about the theoretical status of Marxism in this historical project, and about the nature of the 'break' represented by the late nineteenth century. Foucault too has made an influential contribution to these questions, though his central conception of 'power' remains problematic.

Though the existing work on the social theory of male homosexuality frequently touches upon the question of gender, it is an elusive theme. To grasp its importance, it is necessary to reject monolithic conceptions of masculinity, and to view gender relations historically. This perspective offers a shaper focus for the major questions defined by the gay movement and by sociological and historical studies of male homosexuality.