HOMOSEXUAL

Oppression and Liberation

Dennis Altman

with a new Introduction by Jeffrey Weeks
and a new Afterword by the author

introduction
to 1993 edition
by Jeffrey Weeks

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ments have had an international significance. Here was an Australian political scientist writing about what seemed a quintessentially American phenomenon, and soon finding that its impact was also back at home, and throughout the developed world. Dennis Altman has proved since then that he is an ideal interpreter and translator, equally at home intellectually in Australia, North America, Europe, and most recently in Southeast Asia. The internationalism of his commitments and activities is perhaps the most impressive thing about his career as a whole, and it is already latent in this book.

I want now to pick out three strands in *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* which seem to me to be of enduring importance: the emphasis on identity; the relationship between community and social movement; and Altman's still controversial looking forward to the "end of the homosexual."

The book's central concern, Altman writes in his Introduction, is the "question of identity." It has also been the central concern of all subsequent lesbian and gay literature and politics. Coming out, the public assertion and affirmation of one's homosexuality, of identity, was at once the most simple and the most fundamental activity of the new sexual politics of the 1970s. Of course, there were many "known" homosexuals before 1969, and many of them had made brave political and personal statements. But think of some of the consequences, just for some of the homosexual writers Altman respects and refers to in the book. Gore Vidal's first novel, explicit for the time (the late 1940s), had all but ruined his career before it had barely begun; Christopher Isherwood had gone into exile, and literary silence for a while, rather than endure the hypocrisies of England; James Baldwin had to endure the vituperations of his fellow blacks, convinced he had sold out to white faggotry. But for Altman's generation, writing as a gay person became for the first time not merely desirable, but a necessity, even if coming out was, as he says, a "long and painful process."

A new emphasis had entered the discourse of identity: an awareness of the historical and social factors that had shaped attitudes

toward and inhibited the expression of homosexuality. "To be a homosexual in our society," writes Altman, echoing Erving Goffman's discussion of "spoiled identities," "is to be constantly aware that one bears a stigma." The task of the new identity-politics (though that term was only to be fully articulated a decade after this book first appeared) was to understand why homosexuals were stigmatized, or to put it in another, more political, way, why homosexuals were oppressed; and how to fight that oppression.

Oppression, the "denial of identity," could take three forms: persecution, discrimination, or tolerance. Of these, in the ostensibly permissive climate of the early 1970s, the most common was liberal tolerance, "annihilation by blandness" in Christopher Isherwood's phrase. Here we can see the influence of another of Altman's mentors, Herbert Marcuse, whose emphasis on "repressive desublimation," the controlled deregulation of sexuality in order to bind individuals ever more tightly to the system with chains of gold, had a powerful, if in retrospect, short-lived influence on 1960s radicals. In a cultural climate like that of the 1980s and early 1990s, tolerance does not, perhaps, seem such a bad thing as it might have done earlier. But the real point that Altman was making still rings true: there is a form of toleration which lives with difference without fully validating it; the sort of tolerance which says "what a pity you are homosexual, but we still love you." Altman's case was that this form of liberal pity was as unacceptable, and as damaging to self-pride, as the more overt forms of hatred of homosexuality. It fell far short of full acceptance.

Altman's arguments, then, asserted the validity of homosexuality in its own terms, and in particular its importance for a resolute and affirmative sense of self and of belonging, that is for identity. This offered a major break with traditional writings about homosexuality, which in effect had seen it as a symptom of failed identification, that is failure to be a normal, heterosexual person. Instead, Altman was asserting, on the contrary, that in a world of diverse sexualities, there was no intrinsic difference between heterosexuality