



when men meet

Homosexuality
and Modernity

Henning
Bech

WHEN MEN MEET

HOMOSEXUALITY AND
MODERNITY

Henning Bech

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Tim Davies*

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WHEN MEN MEET

Preface

The English text is a translated and revised version of the original Danish edition of 1987. The main argument of the book is basically unchanged. The line and steps of progression have been more clearly elaborated, implying also some reorganizing of the material and some cuts in sub-arguments. The metatheoretical framework, methodological guidelines, theoretical specificity and epistemological status of the work have been made more explicit (in new introductory sections on 'Aims' and 'Approaches', as well as in the opening and concluding sections of the main chapters and in the notes). Examples too specifically Danish to make sense to an international readership have been left out or replaced by other material.

Although the basic argument of the book remains unchanged, the English edition contains some important additions and elaborations. In chapter III, I have dealt more extensively with the spatial implications of 'absent homosexuality' in relation to the geography of everyday life. I have also added an explicit discussion of the concept of 'homophobia', criticizing its focus on the negative and destructive sides of male resistance to physical-orgasmic homosexuality, and problematizing widespread notions that a cultivation of cultural masculinity and male-male relations is necessarily equivalent to 'misogyny'. These concerns are the object of the new sections on 'Closets' and 'Homophobia', as well as of additions to the subsequent sections (18-21). In chapter IV on 'The Homosexual Form of Existence', I have detailed my critique of 'discursive constructionism' as well as pointed to a certain doubleness in the concept of 'identity'. I have described in more detail the specifics

and the importance of urban sexualization (sections 13 and 17), and I have added a new section (19) on the pleasures and problems of male homosexual couples. I have also stressed the material 'sedimentatedness' of the homosexual world and its influence in giving 'form' to homosexual existence (sections 22 and 23). Chapter VI on 'The Disappearance of the Modern Homosexual' has been substantially enlarged, including discussions of the legislation on 'homosexual marriages'; of national differences in the trends towards the disappearance of the modern homosexual; and of the phenomena of the 'queer' (section 2). I have also added a discussion of the changes in 'non-homosexual' men's relations to male-male sexuality – changes amounting to a tendential 'disappearance of the modern heterosexual' (section 4). Along the way (and particularly in the notes on chapters III.17, IV.2, IV.3 and IV.17) I have specified some implications of my analyses for research on non-modern forms of male-male sexuality and erotics, as well as on the historical development and specific subforms of modern homosexuality. Above all, these implications concern questions related to gender.

In general, I have had the opportunity of re-thinking my theories and analyses in the light of the impressive amount of scholarly literature which has appeared in the field since I first wrote the original Danish text during the mid-1980s. This new literature has been important in relation to the additions and elaborations mentioned above. It has also allowed me to flesh out my arguments with references to additional empirical material, as well as forced me into discussions of what would or would seem to contradict my theories and analyses. In accordance with the principles on which the book is written (see n. 8 to the Introduction), these discussions have been primarily conducted in the notes; in general, the fleshing-out and the critical reflections deriving from the impact of this new literature can easily be identified by paying attention to the publication dates of the works referred to. (On the principles for selection of the reference literature, see n. 22 to the Introduction; following these principles, I have also reduced references, given in the Danish edition, to the literature published before 1986/7.)

Quotations from texts not written in or previously translated into English have been translated by my translators and myself.

The Danish Social Science Research Council has kindly given financial support for the work of revising the book and translating it into English. My special thanks for providing me with, among other things, approval, books, chocolate, criticism, dishes (rich or – sometimes as essential – simply clean), encouragement, inspira-

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tion, invitations or money go to Zygmunt Bauman, Margareta Bertilsson, Michael Bochow, Matthias Duyves, Anthony Giddens, Gert Hekma, Preben Hertoft, Rüdiger Lautmann, Klaus-Jürgen Lüttjohann, Karin Lützen, Jan Löfström, Frank Mort, Mehmet Necef, Arne Nilsson, Poul Poder Pedersen, Ken Plummer, Wilhelm Rosen, Bente Rosenbeck, Hans Soetaert, Ulla Thorborg, Jeffrey Weeks, Øystein Ziener; and to Anders Møller. None of whom, of course, are responsible for the contents of the book.

Henning Bech
Copenhagen
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I

Introduction

1 A woman passing

Before going out one evening, a woman puts on men's clothes, cuts her nails square, practises a male gait and glues on a moustache. She wants to pass as a man, and thus resembles those of her fellow sisters, especially from the nineteenth century, about whom Jonathan Katz writes and whom he calls 'passing women': women who – for economic or other reasons – dressed and worked and lived as men.¹ This woman – her name is Rita Mae Brown – is not on her way to work, however, and neither is she, as some readers may suspect, heading for a lesbian pub. She is on an expedition to an unknown territory, a land of men and men alone: she wants to visit a gay bath house. She manages to get in; and unlike the others she doesn't take off all her clothes but puts on a short robe; after which she investigates the premises: the TV room, the maze, the orgy room, the cubicles, the steam bath, the sauna. She notices how the usual social hierarchy is replaced here by another – condition of body, size of penis, age – and the tension, competition, anxiety that go along with it; but also the possibility of total abandon in the darker rooms, of losing oneself in anonymity and carnal desire. She registers the obsession with penis, erection and orgasm, but also senses other needs, for human contact, for love, though more disguised. She is struck by the silence and the direct way these men look at each other and engage in each other, but also by the security and the ease with which they accept refusal. A few hours later she leaves and reflects on the experience. Perhaps there is a risk that, for some of these

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men, life narrows down to sex, as much of it as possible with as many as possible who look the best, but she wants to have this option for herself as well: to be able to choose between – or choose to combine – deep long-term relationships, bath house sex, and short-term affairs. She wishes this type of refuge existed for women: it would resemble the baths, but there would perhaps be less competition, more laughter, and people would touch each other not only to have sex but just to touch.²

2 Aims

This book is about the conditions and possibilities of life in contemporary modern societies. The theme is explored through a discussion of the relations between homosexuality, masculinity and modernity. And, of these, the point of departure and reference will be the exemplary, as I shall argue, phenomenon of male homosexuality.³

This is not a field uncultivated by science. Indeed, it might have seemed devastated and scrubby after decades of exploitation by medicine, psychiatry and psychology. However, methods of cultivation were revolutionized from the 1960s by the scholarly approach eventually labelled *social constructionism*. The homosexual, it was argued, is not a particular type of human being to be found in all societies throughout history. He is essentially a social and cultural construction first produced in north-western societies in recent centuries.⁴

The debate between social constructionism and its critics, often labelled 'essentialists', quickly grew impassioned, even rancorous; and it has recently become near-mandatory in advanced studies to kowtow in the opening lines and asseverate that one's work can neither be placed in one category nor the other.⁵ As for the present book, 'constructionism' constitutes a major theoretical background and source of inspiration, both for the original Danish edition of 1987 and for this revised English one. However, I do think there have been, and still are, substantial problems at the very foundations of much constructionist scholarship.

One problem concerns the conceptualization of what is the modern male homosexual – a question so often answered in terms of a homosexual 'identity'. A further difficulty concerns the relations to homosexuality among 'non-homosexual' men. Insofar

as this area was not simply left aside, it has often been theorized in terms of 'latent homosexuality', 'repression', 'sublimation', or 'homophobia'. Third, there is the question of what constitutes the 'sexual' and 'male' qualities of modern male homosexuality, and to what extent these can be addressed within the intellectual paradigms and with the analytical tools traditionally considered appropriate in science and scholarship – to say nothing of normative canons and political correctness. There may, sometimes, have been simplifications or omissions concerning the representation of passion and sensuality, as well as of the attraction to and attractiveness of *men*, and accordingly of masculinity. Fourth, there is the question of which phenomena in modern societies hold the greatest importance for the existence of modern homosexuality, as well as the problem of the relations between this homosexuality and the other phenomena of these societies. Very often, the emphasis has been put on the constitutive significance of such entities as 'discourses', 'categories', 'meanings', 'labels', 'scripts' or 'roles' and the possible reinforcement of these by the social institutions of 'medicine', 'law', 'the media', 'the nuclear family', 'patriarchy', 'masculinity', 'capitalism', 'the state' or 'power'.

On these four, fairly substantial points I do not think that the perhaps most favoured ideas, theories and concepts of constructionism are entirely satisfactory from a theoretical and meta-theoretical point of view. Nor do I think that they are quite in tune with the subject matter, the 'empirical material' of homosexuality and modernity – and often not even with the material presented by the constructionist scholars themselves.⁶

These problems are among the major theoretical driving forces of this book. But it should not be forgotten that its broader interest is to explore, by way of a particularly instructive phenomenon, the conditions and possibilities of life in contemporary modern societies – a concern of some relevance, I hope, for women as well as men, 'heterosexuals' as well as 'homosexuals'.

3 Approaches

In the rest of this introduction, I shall enter into a fairly technical discussion of the framework, methods, style, and practical interests of the book.⁷ Readers who want to get down to business may wish to skip to chapter II. Similar advice should be given concerning the

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notes. They contain various kinds of discussions and references – vital to the academic reader, but perhaps less interesting to others.⁸

Frame The general frame of investigation – scholarly stance, world view, overarching approach – of the book is highly influenced by Anglo-Saxon traditions of cultural studies, social history and symbolic interactionism. However, an equally important impact stems from the continental European traditions of dialectics, materialism, phenomenology, existentialism and critical theory – that is, the works of Hegel, Marx, Simmel, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Kracauer, Horkheimer, Adorno, Benjamin and Foucault. These authors are present throughout the book, as expert guides, objects of criticism or interlocutors – be it by name, or implicitly in wording, touch or tone.

Branch The book belongs within the realm of social science and cultural studies. Although specifying its objects to be historically constituted, it is not a work of history in any traditional sense. The task is to investigate the modern phenomenon of homosexuality as one that *exists*, examining its basic features and the conditions without which it couldn't exist and couldn't continue to exist. In this process, certain points will emerge from which one may take one's bearings in studying the origins of the phenomenon; but it is not the principal aim of the book to answer this question. We are investigating, as Marx might have said, the already existing homosexuality, not its coming into existence.⁹ Neither is it the objective to write the story of what happened, year by year, from the point at which the phenomenon was established up till now. Instead, it's a matter of producing, insofar as this is possible, a still picture, a kind of snapshot of the basic features which have remained constant over the years. (I write 'insofar as this is possible', as one cannot presuppose that such a pattern of basic features does in fact exist or is particularly substantial.) In another wording, the task is to identify a specific *configuration, conglomeration or formation*. In that particular sense, the analysis is structural. This, however, includes the identification of basic trends of development which, *as trends*, have also remained constant over the years.¹⁰

Methods The study combines a number of traditional methods of social science and cultural studies: participant observation of various spaces and ways of life; analysis of primary texts and

images; critical discussion of existing theoretical and empirical work.¹¹ On a more general level, however, the approach can reasonably be characterized as a phenomenological analysis. It's a matter of *sticking to the phenomena*.¹²

Obviously, one cannot simply read or record the phenomena without bringing along methodological and other equipment. Moreover, it is well known by now that the method cannot avoid being co-constitutive of the object.¹³ But I do not agree with those who claim there is nothing left of the object outside the method. It would be difficult to deny that there are more or less adequate methods to study an object; and what characterizes adequate methods is precisely that they discover more than their own shadow. Accordingly, the methodological guideline of sticking to the phenomena implies respecting the 'primacy of the object'.¹⁴ Exactly which methods can reasonably be put to use, and how they are to be arranged in relation to one another, should ultimately depend upon the unique characteristics of the phenomenon studied. Moreover, upon these will also depend the extent to which a phenomenon can at all reasonably be subjected to the paradigms of conceptualizing, interpreting and explaining that are constitutive of science and scholarship. It is essential to pay attention to the limits of these, point to the dimensions of the object which transcend them, and, occasionally, switch to other, 'non-scientific' forms of intercourse and writing.

One aspect deserves particular comment. Phenomenological analysis is often considered synonymous with 'understanding' the 'hidden meaning' of the phenomena. This is not the position taken in this book. For instance, style, life, sexuality and pleasure are not reducible to 'meaning', and phenomenological analysis should not simply try to 'understand' them or explain them as the expression of something other.¹⁵ The same applies to 'tunings', which make up a basic and inescapable dimension of existence.¹⁶ Moreover, tunings are not merely a substantial part of the phenomena studied; they are co-constitutive of the acts of phenomenological cognition themselves. This does not leave the analyses to pure subjective mood and whim. But it does imply that in their execution and their claim of validity they depend, in part, on whether they manage to *re-present* the tunings. Obviously, this puts quite some stress on matters of style (to which I shall return).

There is a further and significant sense in which the overarching approach can adequately be characterized as a phenomenological analysis, in accordance with major traditions of continental Euro-

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pean phenomenology. It moves within the realm of lived life and experience, or, in another term, the life-world.¹⁷ Its point of departure is some surface phenomenon of the social world as given to human subjectivities. It may, for instance, be a 'tuning' or mood – such as *Angst*; a figure – such as the whore; a gaze; or the design of a space.¹⁸ The analysis tries to apprehend these 'surface' phenomena in their full specificity, however multifaceted and indeterminate they may be. Further, it moves towards unfolding the broader context in which they are situated, as well as discovering constitutive features of the life-world. A guiding question is the following: since this particular phenomenon can appear as a part of the life-world, which other characteristics may we infer apply to the latter? Thus, for instance, at the 'bottom' of the gaze we find the city.¹⁹

The phenomenological analysis used in this book, then, enters into lived experience to unfold it. In the process, it snuggles up to what is quotidian and recognizable, even trivial, for the inhabitants of the life-world; however, it does not stay within the already existing boundaries of their conscious or acknowledged experience. Furthermore, specifying the particular characteristics of a phenomenon implies considering it from the outside as well, in order to determine its difference from other phenomena and the extent to which it is a historical and social creation.²⁰ Accordingly, phenomenological analysis can often shift advantageously between insider and outsider perspectives, going into and out of the life-world; as well as tack between levels of concrete experience and abstract theory.

Status The analyses of *When Men Meet* are in the nature of interpretations and presentations, readings and displays, illuminations and suggestions. As a whole they constitute what might be termed a *qualified story*. I intend it to be in accordance with the existing relevant, empirical research material (others' as well as my own); and I intend it to have been subjected to a reasonable degree of critical theoretical reflection.²¹ But the story – like all scholarship and science, whether they realize their 'storied' nature or not – has dimensions transcending this, and to that extent, not least, it might well be assessed in the light of its ability to lend some measure of perspective, its capacity to make one see things in a different light, opening up new possibilities.

Many of the book's topics, and much of the material for its analyses, have of course been discussed in other studies. And

indeed, I have made extensive use of others' work.²² However, the reader will find that I usually ask somewhat different questions, apply a somewhat different perspective and arrive at somewhat different results. Thus the book is a contribution to ongoing dialogue and mutual inspiration, on the basis of what a tradition of scholars has achieved.

Presentation and style A number of different organizational principles are at work, crossing paths in the succession of chapters. There is the more traditional one of first introducing other researchers' understanding of a topic, then presenting one's own investigation and finally concluding how far this had led to other results. But there is also a principle of 'development' (or, in the Hegelian term, *Entwicklung*). The presentation follows the movement of thought dependent upon the object's 'own logic' as well as upon the methodological and discursive necessities of an adequate representation of this. A third organizational principle is that of montage. In part, this device of textual construction likewise reflects the characteristics and movements of the object and of cognition – but here, notably, the ruptures and lack of coherent completeness in both. It further offers the possibility of exploiting certain cognitive effects. The 'space' between the individual pieces of the montage becomes one of reciprocal commentary, elaboration and friction that may, perhaps, spark off additional dimensions of cognition, and help make the text *move*.

The exposition moreover makes use of a number of aesthetic and rhetorical devices such as ambiguity, irony and other features of style traditionally associated with literary fiction. Although these are sometimes rejected as not belonging to the domain of sociology and cultural studies, they have proved essential and ineradicable,²³ and I shall take the stance that the trick is to utilize them instead. In addition, there are special reasons for using such literary devices in a study like the present one. It is phenomenological, trying to represent as adequately as possible the phenomena of lived life in their very concreteness and their tunings; in Kracauer's words, it aims at performing 'interpretations in the concrete material'.²⁴ Moreover, some particular groups of phenomena are those of pleasure ('sexual', 'erotic' or other); the representation of this places special demands on the style of the exposition if it is not simply, in Adorno's words, to commit conceptual violence against its subject matter and perhaps thereby double the violence that has already been committed in reality.²⁵