

— Appendix —

Some questions on the gay and lesbian movement

The gay and lesbian movement, both tacitly, by its existence and its symbolic actions, and explicitly, by the discourses and theories that it produces or to which it gives rise, raises a number of questions which are among the most important ones in the social sciences, and, in some cases, entirely new.¹ This movement of revolt against a particular form of symbolic violence, as well as bringing into existence new objects of analysis, very profoundly calls into question the prevailing symbolic order and poses in an entirely radical way the question of the foundations of that order and the conditions for a successful mobilization with a view to subverting it.

The particular form of symbolic domination suffered by homosexuals, who are marked by a stigma which, unlike skin colour or female gender, can be concealed (or flaunted), is imposed through collective acts of categorization which set up significant negatively marked differences, and so create groups – stigmatized social categories. As in some kinds of racism, this

¹ In this text, of which I presented a first sketch at a meeting devoted to research on gays and lesbians, I shall refer only to 'the movement', without taking a position on the very complex relationship that the various groups – collectives and associations – that constitute it have with the 'collectivity/ies' or 'category/ies' – rather than 'community/ies' – of gays or lesbians, which are themselves very difficult to define (should the criterion be sexual practices – and then, declared or hidden, actual or potential? – frequenting certain places, a certain lifestyle, etc.?).

symbolic domination takes the form of a denial of public, visible existence. Oppression in the form of 'invisibilization' comes through a refusal of legitimate, public existence, i.e. of an existence that is known and recognized, especially by law, and through a stigmatization which never appears more clearly than when the movement claims visibility. It is then explicitly invited to return to the 'discretion' or dissimulation that it is ordinarily required to observe.

To speak of domination or symbolic violence is to say that, except in the case of a subversive revolt leading to inversion of the categories of perception and appreciation, the dominated tend to adopt the dominant point of view on themselves. Especially through the *destiny effect* produced by stigmatizing categorization and in particular through real or potential insults, they can thus be led to apply to themselves and accept, under constraint, 'straight' categories of perception ('straight' as opposed to 'crooked', bent, as in the Mediterranean vision), and to feel ashamed of the sexual experience which, from the point of view of the dominant categories, defines them, oscillating between the fear of being perceived, unmasked, and the desire to be recognized by other homosexuals.

The particularity of this relationship of symbolic domination is that it is linked not to visible sexual signs but to sexual practice. The dominant definition of the legitimate form of this practice as the relation of dominance of the masculine principle (active, penetrating) over the female principle (passive, penetrated) implies the taboo of the sacrilegious feminization of the masculine, i.e. of the dominant principle, which is inscribed in the homosexual relationship. Bearing witness to the universality of the recognition granted to the androcentric mythology, gays themselves very often apply the dominant principles to themselves, even though, together with women, they are the prime victims of those principles. In the couples that they form, they often reproduce, as do lesbians, a division of male and female roles that does not tend to bring them closer to the feminists (who are always ready to suspect their complicity with the male gender to which they belong, even if it oppresses them), and they sometimes take to extremes the affirmation of manliness in its commonest form, no doubt in reaction against the once dominant 'effeminate' style.

Inscribed both in objectivity, in the form of instituted divisions, and in bodies, in the form of an internalized relation of domination (revealed in shame), the parallel oppositions which are constitutive of this mythology structure the perception of one's own body and of the uses, especially the sexual ones, that are made of it, i.e. both the sexual division of labour and the division of sexual labour. And it is perhaps because it recalls in a particularly acute way the link between sexuality and power, and therefore politics (for example, by evoking the doubly 'unnatural' and therefore monstrous character that passive homosexuality with a dominated agent takes on in many societies), that analysis of homosexuality can lead to a *politics* (or a *utopia*) of *sexuality* aimed at radically differentiating the sexual relation from a power relation.

But in the absence of the will or the capacity to undertake such a radical subversion of the social structures and the cognitive structures which would have to mobilize all the victims of a sexually based discrimination (and, more generally, all those who are stigmatized), one is inevitably trapped in one of the most tragic antinomies of symbolic domination: how can people revolt against a socially imposed categorization except by organizing themselves as a category constructed according to that categorization, and so implementing the classifications and restrictions that it seeks to resist (rather than, for example, fighting for a new sexual order in which the distinction between the different sexual statuses would be indifferent)? Can the movement which has helped to underline the fact that, like the family, the region or any other collective entity, the status of gay or lesbian is nothing but a social construction, based on belief, be satisfied with the symbolic revolution capable of making that construction visible, known and recognized, of conferring on it the full and complete existence of a *realized category* by inverting the sign of the stigma and making it an emblem – like 'gay pride', the public, momentary, extraordinary manifestation of the collective existence of the invisible group? All the more so since, by revealing the status of 'gay' or 'lesbian' to be a social construction, a collective fiction of the 'heteronormative' order, *which has moreover partly been constructed against the homosexual*, and by underlining the extreme

diversity of all the members of that constructed category, the movement tends (and this is another antinomy) in a sense to dissolve its own social bases, the very ones that it has to construct in order to exist as a social force capable of overthrowing the dominant symbolic order and in order to give strength to the demand of which it is the bearer.

And should it push its demands (and its contradiction) to their logical conclusion by asking the state to give the stigmatized group the durable and ordinary recognition of a public, published status, in a solemn act of registration? For it is true that the action of symbolic subversion, if it wants to be realistic, cannot draw the line at symbolic breaks – even if, like some aesthetic provocations, they are effective in suspending self-evidences. To accomplish a durable change in representations, it must perform and impose a durable transformation of the internalized categories (schemes of thought) which, through upbringing and education, confer the status of self-evident, necessary, undisputed natural reality, within the scope of their validity, on the social categories that they produce. It must ask law for a recognition of the particularity which implies its annulment: for everything takes place as if the homosexuals who have had to fight to move from invisibility to visibility, to cease to be excluded and made invisible, sought to become invisible again, and in a sense neutered and neutralized by submission to the dominant norm.² And one only has to consider all the contradictions implied in the notion of 'head of the household' when it is applied to one of the members of a homosexual couple to understand that the realism that leads people to see the 'contract of civil union' as the price to be paid for 'acceptance' and for the right to the *visible invisibility* of the

2 The structural contradiction that is at their heart condemns movements springing from dominated and stigmatized groups to oscillate between invisibilization and exhibition, between the suppression and the celebration of difference. As a consequence, like the Civil Rights movement and the feminist movement, they adopt one or the other strategy according to the circumstances, depending on the structure of the organizations, their access to politics and the kinds of opposition they encounter (cf. M. Bernstein, 'Celebration and suppression: the strategic uses of identity by the lesbian and gay movement', *American Journal of Sociology*, no. 103 (Nov. 1997), pp. 531–65.

good soldier, the good citizen or the good spouse, and by the same token, to a minimum share in the rights normally granted to any full member of the community (such as rights of succession), does not readily justify, for many homosexuals, the concessions to the symbolic order implied in such a contract, such as the premise of the dependent status of one member of the couple. (It is remarkable that, as Annick Prieur notes,³ as if to minimize the inconsistency that results from maintaining difference, and even hierarchy, within couples resulting from the scandalous transgression of the sacred frontier between male and female, the associations of homosexuals in the Nordic countries that have won recognition of the civil union of homosexuals have chosen to put forward couples of quasi-twins presenting none of the signs tending to recall that division and the active/passive opposition which underlies it.)

Is it possible to convert the antinomy into a choice between alternatives amenable to a rational decision? The strength of orthodoxy, in other words the 'straight' and conservative *doxa* that every form of domination (white, male, bourgeois) imposes, is that it constitutes the particularities which result from historical discrimination as embodied dispositions invested with all the signs of naturalness. These dispositions, generally so deeply adjusted to the objective constraints of which they are the product that they imply a form of tacit acceptance of those constraints (with, for example, ghettoization as 'love of the ghetto'), inevitably appear either, when they are attached to members of the dominant groups, as unmarked, neutral, universal attributes, in other words, as both visible and distinctive and at the same time invisible, unmarked, natural ('natural distinction'), or, when they are attached to members of dominated groups, as 'differences', in other words, as shortcomings, even stigmata, requiring justification. Orthodoxy thus gives an objective basis, and a terrible efficacy, to all the strategies of the universalist hypocrisy which, reversing the responsibilities, denounces any demand for access by the dominated to common rights and status as a particularist or 'communi-

3 A. Prieur and R. S. Halvorsen, 'Le droit à l'indifférence: le mariage homosexuel', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, no. 113 (1996), pp. 6-15.

tarian' breach of the universalist contract. For, paradoxically, it is when they mobilize to demand universal rights which they are in fact denied that the members of symbolic minorities are recalled to the order of the universal. The particularism and 'communitarianism' of the gay and lesbian movement are never more violently condemned than when, in particular in support of the contract of civil union, they demand that the common law be applied to gays and lesbians (who are doubly dominated, even within a movement that is made up of 90 per cent gays and 10 per cent lesbians and marked by a strongly masculinist tradition).

How, then, can one stand up to a hypocritical universalism without universalizing a particularism? In more realistic, that is to say more directly political, terms, how can one prevent the conquests of the movement from ending up as a form of ghettoization? Because it is based on a particularity of behaviour which does not imply and does not necessarily entail economic and social handicaps, the gay and lesbian movement brings together individuals who, although stigmatized, are relatively privileged, especially in terms of cultural capital, which constitutes a considerable asset in their symbolic struggles. The objective of every movement committed to symbolic subversion is to perform a labour of symbolic destruction and construction aimed at imposing new categories of perception and appreciation, so as to construct a group or, more radically, to destroy the very principle of division through which the stigmatizing group and the stigmatized group are produced. Homosexuals are particularly well armed to achieve this task and they can implement the advantages linked to particularism in the service of universalism, especially in subversive struggles.

There is a final difficulty to consider: because this movement, like the feminist movement, has the particularity of bringing together agents endowed with strong cultural capital, it is bound to encounter, in a particularly acute form, the problem of delegation to a spokesperson capable of making the group by embodying it and expressing it, and, like some movements of the far left, it tends to atomize into sects engaged in struggles for the monopoly of the public expression of the group. As a consequence, it may be that the only way for such a movement to escape a mutually reinforcing ghettoization and

sectarianism is for it to place the specific capacities that it owes to the relatively improbable combination of a strong subversive disposition, linked to a stigmatized status, and strong cultural capital at the service of the social movement as a whole; or – to think in utopian terms for a moment – to place itself at the avant-garde, at least as regards theoretical work and symbolic action (in which some homosexual groups are pastmasters), of the subversive political and scientific movements, thus applying, in the service of the universal, the particular advantages which distinguish homosexuals from other stigmatized groups.

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