



Premodern Origins of Modern Homophobia and Masculinity

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Abstract: Premodern and early modern perceptions of same-sex desires and behaviors, in particular in Protestant seventeenth and eighteenth century Holland, show similarities with modern discourse on homophobia, especially vis-à-vis the suggested mutability of homosexuality. Early European perceptions of homosexuality represented universalizing discourses according to which everybody could become a sodomite. Like modern discourses on homophobia, they originated from a comprehensive sexual ontology—one that expressed an apparent unity of notions concerning eroticism, gender, mind/body distinctions, the polity, and cosmology—attributed little or no agency to the mind, and could only perceive of same-sex behavior as the result of a body spun completely out of control. Examination of the case of the Netherlands in the eighteenth century shows the anxieties such ideas can provoke and helps to shed light on tensions underlying modern discourses on homophobia.

Key words: history; ontology; persecution

In her book, *The Antigay Agenda* (1997), Didi Herman looks at the American Christian right and the extent to which it has increasingly organized as a social and political force around its antigay agenda. She also examines the development of the Christian right's claims concerning the mutability of homosexuality, and what it is that homosexuality represents in such a discourse. She concludes that homosexuality in this context nearly always means male homosexuality and that lesbianism—as so often is the case in mainstream (and sub) cultures—is rarely addressed, except to the extent that it fits with anti-feminist stands. In her analysis, Herman also points to the inevitable tensions, loopholes, and outright contradictions in these discourses, which seem to be caused by, among other things, changing political needs and strategies.

For example, while the Christian right's denial of the immutability of homosexuality, as well as its denial of homosexuality as a genuine or legitimate category,

are key to understanding its discourses, the corollary belief in the mutability of homosexuality does not always fit comfortably with other parts of its arguments. Indeed, it represents a point of view that is not universally accepted by all segments of the Christian right. Interestingly, *mutable* does not always seem to mean the same thing or even have the same causes. Some segments of the Christian right focus on therapy to cure gays and lesbians and rely heavily on the traditional pathologization model of homosexuality, which alleges that it is caused by early childhood trauma or experience. To the extent that these groups conceive of homosexuality as a condition, they tend to present it as an addiction. Other parts of the Christian right see homosexuality as a manifestation of greed and hedonism, a position which serves to fight what they see as the illegitimate claims of gay and lesbian communities for legal rights. These segments of the Christian right also claim that gays and lesbians have

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already acquired inordinate amounts of wealth and that legal rights would only give them more power (which apparently they also have in abundance) and more wealth.

Of course it is not too difficult to point out the flaws in this kind of reasoning. Insofar as the Christian right refers to scientific research, their references often involve the juggling of figures, for example, their claims about the higher incomes of gays. As Herman (1997) shows, figures on gay incomes used by the Christian right in the 1990s were based on a 1988 survey of a self selected group of readers of gay magazines. One manipulation of these figures involved comparison with the incomes of a group of African Americans, which were reported as much lower, but in fact the comparisons were made between the self selected group of gay readers and the poorest African-Americans (Herman, 1997). Also, the apparent mutability of homosexuality does not sit well with claims of the Christian right that only 2% of the population is gay. Such arithmetic obviously comes from a political need to counter the 1 in 20 claim by the gay/lesbian communities regarding the prevalence of homosexuality.

Assertions about the extravagant (and of course illegitimate) wealth of gays and lesbians seem to be rather risky from the Christian right's own perspective and ways of reasoning. Such assertions may fuel resentment against gays and lesbians, yet they also present the detested gay and lesbian life styles as temptations to which even the righteous cannot be strangers. David Halperin's (1995) words on homophobia are particularly apt here:

Homophobic discourses contain no fixed propositional content. They are composed of a potentially infinite number of different but functionally interchangeable assertions, such that whenever any one assertion is falsified or disqualified another one—even with a content exactly contrary to the original one—can be neatly and effectively substituted for it. (p. 33)

Following reasoning in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Halperin illustrates his statement with examples from the history of legal disputes in the United States about whether homosexuality constitutes an immutable characteristic

that used completely contradictory arguments in order to deny gay people their rights. According to Halperin, Sedgwick's work exemplifies Foucauldian analysis of discourse (Foucault, 1978) by refusing to engage the content of homophobic discourses, but instead by analyzing them in terms of their overall strategies.

It may indeed make little sense to engage such discourses in terms of whether they are true or not. While it is not difficult to recognize outright demagoguery or political expediency in many of the Christian right's arguments, I intend to demonstrate in this article, among other things, how such discourses operate in a wider ontology. As a social historian whose main work has been on (perceptions of) same-sex behavior in early modern Holland (from approximately 1680 until 1820), I could not but notice some remarkable resemblances between premodern (partly Protestant and of course European) and contemporary American Christian right discourses on the causes of same-sex behavior, as well as on related topics such as femininity and masculinity. Herman (1997) shows that while the Christian right's commentary on homosexuality is unable to perceive it as a genuine, let alone a legitimate category, it is not informed by traditional stereotypes of the effeminate homosexual. Rather, with its depictions of gay life as bacchanalian, hedonistic, and paganistic, homosexuality is represented as masculinity out of control, unrestrained, and inherently anarchist, and the gay character in these discourses is aggressively hyper-masculine. Although the implications and origins may not be quite the same, the sodomite character (to use the vernacular) in pre- and early modern European discourse shares the hedonistic features of the twentieth and twenty-first century portrayal of the gay man as a hyper-male. However, to anticipate some of my arguments, in pre- and early modern discourse this bacchanalian male character was anything but masculine: indeed masculinity out of control was portrayed as moral effeminacy! Sliding down a slippery slope, moral effeminacy could turn a premodern bon vivant into a womanizer, and this womanizer into a sodomite (see Sturkenboom, 1998; Trumbach, 1989; Van der Meer, 1994, 1995a, 1997).

Even though premodern gender discourse and some modern homophobic discourses share the same

theological roots, it is of course unlikely that the former traveled from Europe unscathed or unchanged through time and space, just to appear again among present day American Protestant constituencies. For example modern American homophobic discourses also center on how gay men (and to some extent lesbians) supposedly prey on the young and innocent. While premodern (until around 1700) discourse took it for granted that same-sex activities occurred between an adult and a (pre)adolescent child, it did not dwell on that aspect of same-sex behavior, much less make that one of its central foci (Van der Meer, 1994, 1995a, 1997). This difference may result from the different meanings of childhood in the two periods and from the fact that premodernity had no gay/lesbian communities who needed to be fought with political expediency.

In what follows, I will outline pre- and early modern perceptions and discourses on same-sex behavior. While I mostly use Dutch sources, these discourses were to a large extent shared throughout Europe. My aim is not to argue that these discourses are essentially the same as current homophobic discourse, but rather to point to premodern origins of modern homophobias. At the same time, I want to delineate the ontological and paradigmatic contexts of these discourses. In a Foucauldian analysis, premodern discourses precede the transition from the pre-sexuality to the sexuality paradigm. The former is the main subject of this paper. The sexuality paradigm refers to the nineteenth century medicalization of sexuality and the emergence of sexology as a discipline, which together isolated the erotic as a sphere of life and as an object of knowledge from other human experiences and pursuits.

Exploring sexual ontologies can contribute to understanding anxieties in general, and specifically homophobia, regarding behaviors that are deemed to trespass local norms and consequently undermine the polity itself. As Herman (1997) observed in her book, the antigay agenda of the religious right in the U.S. cannot be separated from conservative Protestant eschatology and millennialist beliefs. One may add that those beliefs can also not be separated from American nationalism. Anticipating the historical account in this paper that focuses on the early modern Dutch

Republic, the then contemporary perceptions of sodomy similarly cannot be separated from the place that this republic was supposed to hold in God's scheme and in creation itself. These perceptions also showed the threat that sodomy apparently posed to the community and to creation (cosmology). While some of the issues involved were entirely local, those perceptions represented universalizing discourses which were shared throughout large parts of pre- and early modern Europe. These discourses were indeed of a universal nature in the sense that they supposedly applied to everyone. Therefore, everyone could become a sodomite, much as in modern Christian fundamentalist discourse everyone can become a homosexual or adopt a homosexual lifestyle, to use the vernacular of such arguments.

Premodern and Early Modern Discourses

The first comprehensive publications—scholarly books, journal articles, and popular prose and poetry—in Holland about same-sex desires appeared in response to dramatic occurrences in 1730. Incidental sodomy trials had been held in the Low Countries ever since the late Middle Ages, and from the last quarter of the seventeenth century their number had been increasing. Yet, the direct cause for the publications in 1730 was an unprecedented wave of sodomy trials that swept through the Netherlands. Between 1730 and 1732 more than 350 men were prosecuted and about 100 of them received the death penalty. The scale of these prosecutions may not have been new in Europe, but the harsh penalties consistently meted out to culprits throughout the eighteenth century were unique to early modern history. It was the rather accidental discovery of sodomite networks and subcultures that was the immediate cause for this series of trials (Boon, 1997; Van der Meer, 1994, 1997).

Later in the eighteenth century men were generally put on trial for sodomy in isolated cases, but discoveries such as those in 1730 also resulted in large series of arrests, executions, and incarcerations in 1764, in 1776, and between 1795 and 1798. By 1811, when Napoleon put the French penal code into effect in the Netherlands, around 800 such trials had been held. Although enforcement of the French penal code

involved the official decriminalization of same-sex behavior, in the first three decades after 1811, on average, about as many men were prosecuted for public indecencies (article 330 Code Pénal) as previously had been prosecuted on sodomy charges (Van der Meer, 1998).

Prior to 1730, sodomy had been viewed in every respect in the Netherlands as the “*crimen nefandum*,” or the “unmentionable vice” and “the vice not to be known or named among Christians.” Since the Reformation, Protestant churches had been silent on this subject, except in anti-papist diatribes. All over Europe same-sex behavior was believed to be a Catholic vice, or as English and Dutch poetry pointed out, more specifically a vice that was particularly popular in Italy (Van der Meer, 1995a, 1997). Dutch late seventeenth century libertine novels, unlike their French and English counterparts, never referred to sodomy (Haks, 1988). Only jurists wrote about sodomy, and their work was intended for a limited professional audience. Teachers of Greek and Latin dealt prudently with classical texts, because there were things in those texts “which were neither useful nor necessary for the young youth to know about” (Van Byler, 1731, Preface, p. 30). Death penalties for sodomy prior to 1730 were usually carried out indoors or in secret, at least from the first quarter of the seventeenth century, “so that it might be held back that such gruesome acts were perpetrated in this country” (Resolutien, 1730, p. 430). In the case of such death penalties, usually only summary verdicts were kept. Courts disposed of the corpses of the culprits by throwing them into the sea or burying them under the gallows, “to put away from the midst of us the memory of such gruesome acts,” as some late seventeenth century verdicts said (Van der Meer, 1995a, p. 201).

The taboo on talking about sodomy had complex origins. First, it was generally believed that knowledge about this subject would provoke unnatural desires. “Formerly, everyone either kept completely silent, or the subject was dealt with cautiously so that no one would know that [sodomy] could be performed, and also so as not to give occasion to cause an infernal lust” (Van Byler, 1731, Preface, p. 29). In addition, prior to 1730, there appeared to be no need to talk about this subject. The idea that it was first and foremost a

Catholic vice, the harsh policies used in the sodomy trials, and, as I will show, also the reigning sexual ontology at the time had all contributed to the belief among secular and ecclesiastical authorities that same-sex practices hardly existed in the Netherlands. One of the things all publications and legislators agreed upon in 1730 was that such practices had only recently emerged in the Dutch republic. That was of course wishful thinking and was directly contradicted by the fact that people in the neighborhoods and streets of the cities knew about sodomites in their surrounding areas decades before 1730. Perhaps such notions fit with rhetorical traditions and principles, yet the assumed previous absence of same-sex behavior was a powerful cultural image that related both to the understanding of desires and to perceptions of the rise of the Dutch Republic in previous centuries. Consequently, the apparently recent emergence of same-sex practices could be explained as a result of the perceived political and economic decline of the country.

The discovery in 1730 of networks and subcultures of sodomites provoked a radical change. From that moment, most executions for sodomy were carried out in public. Trial records were usually carefully kept. A torrent of scholarly and popular publications accompanied the prosecutions and executions. “There is a time to be silent and a time to speak out,” one author observed (Van Byler, 1731, Preface, pp. 29-30). Whereas previously, knowledge about same-sex behavior had been considered to be dangerous because it might induce improper and unnatural desires, from 1730 such knowledge became a necessary deterrent to the behavior.

This radical change in policies also marked the beginning in the Netherlands of what Foucault, in the subtitle of the original French edition of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* (1976), termed “*La Volonté de Savoir*,” or “the will to know” (which was omitted from the English translation). Subsequent to 1730, trial procedures in many ways resembled the Catholic confession used since the Counter Reformation, in which Foucault saw the origins of this will to know. These procedures required suspects to make full confessions, far beyond the evidence that was necessary for a verdict. Although interrogations, as in any trial, focused on acts alone rather than on dreams

and impulses as the Catholic confessions did, it was the minute details of the interrogations that suggest prosecutors and judges were searching and probing for what lay beneath the same-sex behavior. Of course, all those details also served the need in the criminal investigation to identify possible accomplices. While these interrogations at first seemed to search for confirmation of the current understandings of human nature, an attention to exploration of the motives for criminal behavior grew throughout the course of the eighteenth century. At the same time human nature became something that needed to be questioned and examined rather than confirmed. Whereas initially it was self-evident to both prosecutors and suspects that the latter had been seduced into their behavior at some point in life, later attitudes are exemplified in the words of a prosecutor during a trial in 1797. Once the suspect had confessed, the prosecutor ordered him to tell his life story “from his early youth to the present” (Van der Meer, 1995a, p.191). Thus the prosecutions in 1730 and later in the eighteenth century also generated new knowledge and new meanings in relation to same-sex behavior and desires, and about desires more generally.

Premodern Sexual Ontology

The scholarly and popular publications of 1730 referred to before revealed the existence of an enduring sexual ontology. Despite several centuries of official discursive silence on the subject, both the scholarly and popular press showed a remarkable consensus in explaining the causes of same-sex behavior and its assumed recent emergence in the Dutch Republic. This consensus suggests that the assumptions underlying this ontology, and in particular its implied psychology, were as widely shared as are ideas about the importance of early childhood experience in modern theories of psychology. Such assumptions were described both in the contemporaneous scholarly and popular publications as well as in the words of prosecutors, suspects, and witnesses.

The idea that same-sex behavior prior to the eighteenth century rarely occurred in the Dutch Republic was supported by the beliefs about the causes of such behavior. Sodomy was supposed to be the result of “surpassing steps of sinfulness.” It was suggested

that as in Sodom and Gomorrah—which like the Netherlands had been located on a rich and fertile plain—a so-called “excess of diet” had produced this kind of behavior in Holland. Excessive indulgence in comfort, food, drink, dressing, and rest, in short, gluttony, was supposed to provoke passions for such sinful practices as card playing, throwing dice, gambling, adultery, whoring, and womanizing, and in the end would culminate in same-sex practices (see Beels, 1730; Korte Historische en Oordeelkundige Verhandeling over de Sodomie, 1730; Royaards, 1731; Van Byler, 1731; Weyerman, 1730a, 1730b). As one author stated (Weyerman, 1730a), a vice once tasted singed the senses and caused a craving for more and especially for worse. He explained that something as unnatural as sodomy could thus originate in something that was purely natural. Once a person had reached the bottom of the slippery slope—sodomy—there was no way back. Such an individual would “hold on” to it, as the words of both prosecutors and those prosecuted stated over and over again in eighteenth century court records. Even if prosecutors did not ask defendants how long they had participated in these acts, the latter often volunteered such information. They sometimes added that they damned the day it had first happened, but they had thenceforth been unable to abstain from these practices (Van der Meer, 1994). In contrast to the then current claims that sodomy was only perceived of as an act, boys in their early teens, and sometimes even pre-teens, suspected of sodomy (mostly with one another) were prosecuted and sometimes suffered severe penalties precisely because they were considered to be already lost forever (Van der Meer, 1995a).

Ever since the Reformation, the Dutch had shown sobriety and restraint, and many believed that because of these qualities the country had been blessed with prosperity and a powerful position in the world. In fact, this good fortune was thought to show that the Dutch were God’s new chosen people and that the Dutch Republic was a new Israel. This idea of a new Israel was especially prevalent in the seventeenth century and was celebrated time and again in sermons and writings (although not everybody agreed on whether the whole nation or just the members of the Reformed Church was the chosen group) (Roodenburg, 1990, pp. 29-31). The notion was evoked retrospectively once again

during the 1730 trials. According to this reasoning, as God's newly chosen people, the ancestors of the 1730 generation could not have been familiar with the vice of sodomy. If so, God would have punished the country, as he had once done in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, prosperity was a mixed blessing and by 1730 it was obvious that the Dutch had for some time given into gluttonous behavior, and in doing so they had caused the spread of same-sex practices.

What can be observed in such notions is that sexual desires were not separated from other physical needs, such as the need for refreshment, the need for dressing, and the need for rest. Such needs were experienced in a dichotomous way: they could either be fulfilled with restraint or result in excess, gluttony, and hedonism. Indeed, this dichotomy represented a continuum, including sexual and other desires, as well as "natural" and "unnatural" desires. Natural and unnatural were not mutually exclusive, but the one could be an extension of the other. Also, with such emphasis on gluttony, through a dualism of mind and body, desires were understood to be entirely corporal. In this ontology the body played a much more significant role than the mind. The mind was subservient to the flesh. If the flesh gave in to its cravings, the mind lost control. In a poem called "A conversation between the spirit and the flesh," which was published on the occasion of the executions in 1730, the spirit blamed the flesh for the downfall of both of them. Rather than bridging the gap between the two, the flesh confirmed it, since it did not understand what the spirit meant, least of all "because we are next of kin" (Alle de copyen, 1730, pp.138-140).

The dichotomous experience of sobriety and gluttony related to the experience of sex and gender and consequently to the experience of the body and of nature. Whether or not there ever was a one sex society, in which women were supposed to have the inverted and inferior version of male genitals, as Thomas Laqueur (1990) claims, at the very least women were portrayed in numerous discourses as being endowed with an insatiable lust in their wombs that could only be controlled when they submitted themselves to the hierarchy between the sexes (Roodenburg, 1985). Therefore, women were thought to be by nature morally inferior to men; men were

thought by nature to be capable of restraint. It was the vessel that made the difference; not the desires themselves. However, in such discourses, gender, as well as body and nature, instead of referring solely to physical categories, also defined moral ones. Indeed, nature in this discourse was less a source for physical than for moral knowledge, since God had revealed His will in nature. Also, human beings only held stewardship over their bodies. The body was God's temple, and as such, it was to be kept clean from the pollution caused by gluttony.

Yet, moral categories are reversible. Like women, men could also lose control over their bodies. They could become as insatiable as women were supposed to be, turn themselves into womanizers, and ultimately end up as sodomites. Sodomy was consequently believed to be an "effeminate disease," as the humanist Josephus Scaliger had allegedly already said by the late sixteenth century (Van Byler, 1731, p. 51). A sodomite was called a "he-whore," as documented by an English author two centuries later (Trumbach, 1989). Gender was all about the ability—or lack thereof—to exercise control over an inherently unruly body, and in this gender system sodomy was the ultimate sign of loss of control.

This sexual ontology did not only explain an individual's way of life, but as in the case of the Dutch Republic, it could also explain the rise and fall of nations. As such, the psychology-of-the-slippery-slope implied in this ontology applied as much to the collective as to individuals. The fact that some people had turned to sodomy was not just the result of their own doings, but also of the gluttonous behavior of the citizenry in general. In 1730 the latter was emphasized by the popular press, which called for communal repentance and depicted those who were sentenced to death as expiatory sacrifices. In elaborate, carefully designed, and punctual ceremonies in which everybody from the city fathers and the judges to the hangman, the convict, and not least of all the public played their own role, the scaffold at which the executions took place became the altar around which national or communal redemption was celebrated. The convicts' deaths were thus not only punishment for individual behavior; the executions also served to wash away the sins of the whole community and to atone it with God

in the restoration of a polluted universe (Van der Meer, 1995a).

It is clear that one can trace the roots of this way of thinking back to the Middle Ages, if not earlier. Medieval moral teaching claimed that gluttony, along with other vices, produced the daughters of unchastity: adultery, rape, and not least of all the “peccatum contra naturam,” or the crime against nature. After the Reformation, sermons which featured the biblical text about Sodom were delivered in Holland to warn against gluttony without so much as mentioning sodomy. Endless lamentations at annual Protestant synods about common sins of gluttony—ranging from dancing and smoking tobacco to whoring—can be understood from this perspective, and so can religious prescriptions for long and repeated periods of abstinence (see Roodenburg, 1990; Van Deursen, 1992). Even the medical understanding of the *humoria* could fit such notions, because the balance or unbalance of hot and cold bodily fluids it described were believed to be produced by restraint or hedonism, and masculinity or femininity (De Brune, 1644). Emblematic literature and art and especially the paintings of the Dutch School featured over and over again the symbols of gluttony and restraint (De Jongh, 1976). History itself, both ancient and recent, taught about the virtues of restraint and provided a lesson for the present. For example, it was believed that practice of such virtues had allowed the so-called Batavian tribes that had inhabited the swamps of the Low Countries at the beginning of the Christian era to rise against Roman conquerors and lay the foundations for the republic to be formed (Haitsma Mulier, 1992; Leeb, 1973). It was thought that more recently the very same virtues had enabled the Dutch to rise against Catholic Habsburg rule. According to one author who wrote shortly after the first major series of sodomy trials (Mel, 1731), just like the angels had led Lot and the righteous few out of Sodom before its actual destruction, God had delivered his righteous people from Catholicism, setting them free of their oppressor. Such understanding also implied political theory. The opposite of gluttony—“continentia, modestia, absentia”—became, in the neo-stoicism of the internationally renowned Justus Lipsius, an Italian scholar who taught at the end of the sixteenth century

at the University of Leiden, the basis for an incorruptible statesmanship and thus for the well-being of the whole nation (Outram, 1989, pp. 69-71).

The sexual ontology depicted here cannot be separated from the pursuit of honor, which permeated every aspect of society and life in what Norbert Elias (1996) described as a *shame culture*, which beginning in the late seventeenth century ever so gradually came to be replaced by a *guilt culture*. (Today guilt and shame may coexist as motivations in some cultures.) In a guilt culture, personal conscience and the avoidance of feelings of guilt rather than concern over one's public reputation rule over people's pursuits. In a shame culture, which was still very much alive at the onset of the sodomite trials in eighteenth century Holland, public reputation, which was translated into honor, did not just affect social relations, but was also literally inscribed on the body. Because the body was seen as the locus of desires, people's physical experience and appearance in such a shame culture were viewed as the embodiment of honor, as well as of social and class differences. Through postures (an upright head), gestures (no affectation), and dress (somber and clean), the body could serve as an expression of restraint, and, indeed, of social difference (Roodenburg, 1993). In contrast, according to a Dutch church minister in the late seventeenth century, one could read an “excess of diet” (Hondius, 1679, p. 79) in a person's face. Upper classes commonly denied the lower classes any honor whatsoever, and Dutch iconography traditionally depicted class differences in such a contrasting manner, with lower class people portrayed as hunchbacked and dressed in filthy rags (Roodenburg, 1993). Yet, as modern studies have shown, honor was on the mind of the lower classes as much as the upper classes (Van de Pol, 1992).

One of the key elements in understanding premodern sexuality is the realization that in a shame culture there is little that resembles a private sphere as we know it. Honor as a way of being is by definition a public issue, related to a collective form of subjectivity. “In life there is nothing more important than honor....*It relates to the good feelings others have about us* [italics added]” (Van Leeuwen, 1676, p. 469), as a seventeenth century Dutch jurist summarized the meaning of honor. External forces like the

consequences of public shame, rather than internal fears or guilt, ruled peoples' behaviors and pursuits.

Some professions, such as cleaning lavatories, but above all the profession of hangman, apparently held less honor than others or no honor at all, and members of these professions lived in neighborhoods that were deemed places (and spaces) of dishonor. Generally, people, places, and spaces of ill repute were to be avoided. Pivotal to a shame culture is the idea or fear that dishonor rubs off. Mere presence at dishonorable places or physical contacts with things or persons deemed to be lacking in honor could ruin one's public standing. For example, people felt that a frightening fall from grace would occur if they appeared bareheaded in a court-room. Even minor engagements with the legal system—let alone being on a scaffold—implied a public shaming that was a direct threat to social survival (Spierenburg, 1984). It is no surprise that verbal abuse in this setting usually took the form of assault on one's honor. Such assaults bore the connotations of a lack of restraint, defined according to gender and social class. The worst offense to a man was to be called someone who had gone bankrupt (Van de Pol, 1992). Bankruptcy was viewed as the result of greed and waste of resources, often through risky speculation, rather than of bad economic times. At times people saw such notions confirmed by actual occurrences, like the notorious tulip mania in 1637, when prices skyrocketed and single bulbs were traded for hundreds of guilders, eventually causing the financial downfall of many (Schama, 1987). The worst that a woman could be called was a "whore," which did not refer to a prostitute per se, but rather to a woman with a poor sexual reputation, signaling her failure to subject herself to the hierarchy between the sexes (Van de Pol, 1992).

Typically for such a shame culture, verbal abuse was a skill that many seemed to have mastered. Arguments between antagonists of every creed easily exploded into lengthy diatribes—often recorded verbatim in court documents and affidavits—in which people commonly used accusations that assaulted the opponent's or victim's honor. Such verbal offense was the most common impetus for civil lawsuits in the early modern period (Roodenburg, 1992). Although it may be difficult to recognize sexual connotations in the more general discourses on honor, it should be

emphasized that sexual feelings were barely separated from other corporeal needs and cravings and that loss or lack of control—even when resulting in bankruptcy—was first and foremost viewed as a corporeal matter.

Honor and dishonor, like masculinity and femininity, were the opposite poles at the far ends of a continuum, representing control—or the lack thereof—over one's body. They were the rods by which all difference, whether based in national, religious, social, class, gender, age or generational, or, even at that time, racial characteristics, was measured. While the Dutch Republic had gained the historical reputation of being tolerant towards immigrants from all over Europe, including Jews, moral inferiority (meaning a lack of restraint) was still quite commonly ascribed to such groups. Publications in 1730 had no good words to spare for Asians, Africans, Turks, or Indians in the Americas (Korte Historische en Oordeelkundige Verhandeling over de Sodomie, 1730). The presumed lack of self-control among these groups was thought to arise from their lack of civilization, and same-sex practices were supposed to be rampant among them. Such group differences served to create hierarchies that were legitimized by assigning differing degrees of honor and dishonor to the various groups and were viewed as the public expression of the group member's capacity (or suspected failure) to exercise restraint.

This society's preoccupation with public standing and self-control was in no way idiosyncratic at the time. One cannot help but be reminded of Johan Huizinga's famous *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (1996), which depicted Western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages as a world in which affects were immediate, dramatic, and explosive, alternating between the extremes of restraint and loss (or absence) of inhibitions, between profound piety and compassion, and extreme violence, cruel rituals, and festive blowouts. For the individual in such a society, self-control was necessary for personal survival at both physical and symbolic levels; for the collective, it implied the survival of the polity. In the absence of a private sphere, individual fall from grace affected the collective. Most important to the collective, the opposite of self-control was viewed as chaos. Chaos was in direct defiance of creation, which, as the first verse of Genesis states, meant that God had brought order into chaos. In a world that could measure the

duration of its existence by counting a limited number of generations (it was believed to be only some 5,000 years old), chaos translated into an immediate threat to creation that could turn the world back to that very first day when earth was still “a formless void.”

In this ontology, sodomy as the ultimate loss of self-control represented extreme chaos that could turn the world and the universe upside down precisely because it was not perceived as an act but as a condition that could affect all (Van der Meer, 1995a). Indeed, these were universalizing discourses that implied that everybody could become a sodomite. From this perspective, human nature obviously was so volatile that human beings had very few inner resources, except their God-given gender or social class, to resist the temptations that their bodies posed, even with all the potentially devastating consequences such a gluttonous lifestyle might bring.

However comprehensive the publications on same-sex desires may have been in 1730, aside from the fact that they now included descriptions of sodomy, there was actually very little that was new about them. Consequently, they represented primarily a finale to traditional discourses on desires. Yet the significance of their contribution is that the beliefs and values they contained in many ways persist to this day. One is reminded here that the “from bad-to-worse” psychology—or the “psychology-of-the-slippery-slope”—implied in this ontology still influences contemporary attitudes about any controversial moral issue and also affects related social, legal, and political policies, whether they deal with sex, drugs, or euthanasia.

Transition From the Premodern to the Modern Sexual Ontology

The prosecutions in 1730 marked a radical turning point in views toward same-sex desire, and new discourses, partly rooted in and building on older ones, emerged that blamed the individual rather than the collective for wrongdoings and sought to explain deviant desires as arising from an interaction between mind and body, rather than from a body that had spun out of control. The occurrences in 1730 also set in motion a redefinition of male sexual orthodoxy. (There

is no other proper term here, as the word *heterosexual* would obviously be anachronistic.) At first, the onlookers around the scaffold wondered why they themselves had not been affected by “unnatural” desires, and they could only reach the conclusion that it had been God’s grace that had saved them. However, even though loss of self-control, which at its worst would result in sodomy, had been considered for a long time to be contrary to a masculine status, few observers in 1730 commented on any effeminate features displayed by sodomites (even though by all accounts quite a few of them had exhibited effeminate characteristics in their speech and dress). Until that time, in Holland, as in England, such outward gender characteristics had been viewed as the hallmarks of a womanizer (Sturkenboom, 1998; Trumbach, 1989).

Thus, only from the second half of the eighteenth century did discourses on the topic begin to be dominated by references to the effete features of sodomites, which were viewed not only as an aspect of their physical appearance but also as a reflection of their inner proclivities. For men, it became important to avoid such outward effeminacy, as these characteristics might raise suspicions about their sexual orthodoxy. And while previously—and in particular considering the particular position the Dutch Republic was supposed to hold in God’s schemes—the polity self had been defined by the control its inhabitants practiced over all their affects, new definitions now emerged that portrayed the nation more directly in terms of masculinity. Sodomy was now believed to undermine the male gender, as a commentator wrote in 1777, and to render it incapable of doing “great things,” which in turn would be detrimental to the strength of the nation (*Nadere bedenkingen*, 1777).

Discourse in general represents ever shifting truths and omnipresent power. Put more schematically, the word *discourse* refers to processes of attribution, and implies the capacity for (individual) appropriation and transformation of meaning. Therefore, hegemonic discourse brings with it the possibility for discursive resistance, through which people who do not (or do not want to) recognize themselves in hegemonic meanings can, in the process of appropriating them, also change or transform them for their own benefit. From the mid-

eighteenth century, sodomites who appeared in courtrooms had discussed, at least among themselves, the innateness of their desires. Some were profoundly pious men and by claiming such desires were inborn, they seem to have created an inner sanctum that was above and beyond worldly condemnation.

By the end of the eighteenth century, a new generation referred to such innate desires as “weaknesses,” which still bore all the gendered connotations of lack of control over one’s urges. But at least some people who engaged in same-sex practices began to think of themselves as belonging to a distinct category of person. This transformation was not yet evident in 1730 when sodomites would refer to one another as “a person who is also hot at it,” or as “a man whose cart does not go straight either” (Van der Meer, 1995a, p. 311). In contrast, by the final quarter of the eighteenth century, expressions like “being of the family” regularly show up in court documents, and in the 1790s one man could say to another, “it is a weakness you and I share with thousands of others” (Van der Meer, 1995a, p. 317). A quarter of a century later, in 1826, a man wrote to his lover, “it is a weakness that is innate to us,” and while speaking with a moral voice that surpassed his own situation, he added that “God has created no human being for its damnation” (Van der Meer, 1995a, p. 12). Such ways of thinking did not escape notice by others. In 1817, an outraged church minister wrote: “Everybody knows that among themselves such villains speak of their detestable lusts as something that is natural and proper to them” (Vink, 1817, p. 43).

In the decades following the enforcement of the French penal code in 1811, more than questionable prosecutorial practices were used in public indecency trials. Often men were convicted on the basis of their reputations rather than because of actual offenses against public decency, or on the basis solely of testimonies from people who had been deliberately spying on them. In the 1820s, several men who had been convicted as a result of such practices appealed their verdicts and developed arguments about public and private spheres. To a large extent as a result of these arguments, by the mid 1830s legal definitions of public and private spaces, to the extent that they were associated with physical space, came to depend upon

the presence or absence of witnesses who were confronted against their will with “obscene” behaviors. In other words, all space was seen as public in the presence of such witnesses, and equally, all space was private when such witnesses were absent.

Considering the courage it took at that time for people to appeal a guilty verdict for public indecency (many were exposed to public scorn, mockery, and outright violence while being transported by foot to a court of appeal), standing up against their verdicts in this manner implied that the definition of private space as physical space had become the externalization of these men’s inner sanctum. To turn the argument around, their inner sanctum had also become the psychological dimension of a legally, socially, culturally, and politically defined private space (Van der Meer, 1998). Indeed, since the mid-eighteenth century, sodomites had developed among themselves a minoritizing discourse, which half a century later had clearly developed further. Due to medical science and the emerging field of sexology, this minoritizing discourse became paradigmatic during the nineteenth century. Significantly, such a shift from universalizing to minoritizing discourses ultimately produced the basis for the creation of (homo)sexual identities, for the demarcation of homosexuality and heterosexuality, and for the emergence of sexuality as a category separate from other spheres of life, which—at least as an object of knowledge—is governed by its own physical and psychological rules.

Conclusion

Premodern discourses on homosexuality and masculinity were rooted in an ontology that attributed little if any agency to individuals, and could only perceive of their sexual desires and behavior as manifestations of a body that had spun out of control. According to the then contemporary understanding, everybody could become a sodomite, that is, become a character that, having given in to greed and hedonism, had slid to the bottom of a slippery slope. Such premodern ontology connected individual, polity, and universe in such a way that left no room for homosexuality as a separate category or as a category alternative to or next to heterosexuality, because

ultimately same-sex desires and behavior meant the undoing of all three levels, indeed of creation itself. Only after the transition to the modern discourse on and paradigm of sexuality, which separated sexuality from other spheres of life, had been completed, could the modern homosexual be born.

The premodern discourses delineated in this paper are not identical to those used by the Christian right in the United States, as outlined by Didi Herman (1997), yet there are major similarities between them. As already suggested, the hypermasculinity ascribed to gay men by the Christian right parallels the moral effeminacy which the early modern period ascribed to sodomites. Other similarities suggest that some current homophobic discourses operate within an ontology that, like the premodern discourse on homosexuality, is pre-sexual in nature. Specifically, the Christian right's ontology regarding homosexuality seems to stand to a large extent outside the paradigm regarding sexuality that came into being during the course of the nineteenth century. A closer look at other aspects of this ontology—for instance the mind/body distinctions implied in some of the Christian right's discourses, or its hierarchy between men and women—reveals other similarities between these current and older discourses. This observation is not intended to criticize the Christian right's ontology by saying that it is age-old, backward, or primitive. On the contrary, it is every bit as complex as the ontology that gave rise to modern gay/lesbian communities, and indeed to modern sexuality, or at least to the predominant sexuality paradigm. The co-existence of these old and new paradigms may help to explain why there seems to be little common ground between gay/lesbian communities and the Christian right in the United States, which in turn, unlike in Western Europe, seems to preclude any debate between the two groups.

Contrary to the universalizing discourses of the Christian right in the United States, current Protestant discourses in the Netherlands—even among the still sizable parts of Protestant communities that are very much tradition oriented—veer towards minoritizing positions, meaning that they take homosexuality to be a genuine and immutable category. Even the official Vatican position on homosexuality is quite different from the American fundamentalist ones, coming much

closer to a minoritizing discourse in its claim that homosexuality represents an “objective disorder” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1975).

Unlike the American Christian right then, modern Protestant churches in Holland as well as the Vatican have placed themselves, albeit sometimes reluctantly, within the modern sexuality paradigm. Perhaps as a consequence, public denunciations of gays and lesbians by Protestant churches in Holland have become few and far between. Unlike in the United States, homosexuality is not a political rallying ground for the Christian right in The Netherlands. Yet adopting a minoritizing discourse is no guarantee against homophobia, as the case of the Vatican shows. The Roman Catholic Church is as vehemently opposed to gay and lesbian rights as it has ever been. However, at the same time the Catholic Church claims to oppose discrimination and ostracism of gays and lesbians, thus betraying internal tensions and loopholes within its own discourses, as well as the fact that the church is on the defense.

Leaving aside official positions, old and new discourses also affect individuals' actions. In a study (Van der Meer, 1995b, 1996, 2003) based on interviews in the early 1990's with a sample of 30 gay bashers (age 14 to 24) in Holland, a majority of them, coming from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, adhered to a belief that actual homosexual experience turns men into homosexuals. These men largely believed that homosexuality is an addiction, and nearly all of them professed to know people who in the past had been homosexuals but who had overcome their habit. This finding sheds a peculiar light on their actions, which entailed such things as going out in groups to gay cruising sites where one of them would act as a decoy. When the decoy was approached by a man with sexual intentions, the whole group would respond in a state of fury and assault the man. Were it not for some more experienced bashers who claimed to hold back the others, unlimited and unchecked violence might have ensued (and indeed sometimes did). In many ways, the actions, motivations, and consequent feelings of these men resembled the dynamics involved in the pursuits of honor and the fear of losing face and reputation which characterized much of early modern Western culture. Only the couple of bashers who believed that

homosexuals had a disposition peculiar to them said that they experienced some form of identification with the victims, and even felt pity towards the people they were beating up. Yet they also felt that they would seriously harm their position or their very participation in the group if other group members became aware of their feelings.

The description in this paper of different ontologies, paradigms, and discourses related to sexuality operating simultaneously in American society can help to explain the contemporary coexistence of different experiences of sexuality and also of multiple types of homophobia. The coexistence of both premodern and modern sexualities is often blocked from view by a historiography that has mainly focused on the era in which the modern sexuality paradigm, sexual categories, and identities came into being, while ignoring the complexities and persistence of views from an earlier period (compare Halperin, 2002, pp. 24-47 with Van der Meer, in press). In addition, the identification of multiple homophobias should in no way be seen as challenging Halperin's (1995) warning not to engage the contents of homophobic discourses, because politically all expressions of homophobia, regardless of their ontological basis, serve a single purpose, to deny lesbian and gay people their rights, often by denigrating them and inflicting harm on them. Yet it certainly does no harm to directly engage the ontology in which these discourses are rooted, because that is where the most fundamental loopholes, tensions, and contradictions in these positions lie and, therefore, where the harm that the expression of such homophobia inflicts on individual men and women can be most directly confronted. As the history outlined in this paper has shown, the transition from premodern to modern sexuality was brought about by people who, against all odds, were able to exploit such tensions and loopholes in the very discourses that could send them to death and ultimately to bend the contents of these discourses for their own benefit. In the end, such understanding teaches us how social, political, and cultural change can be wrought in the crucible of historical shifts in discourses. ♦

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