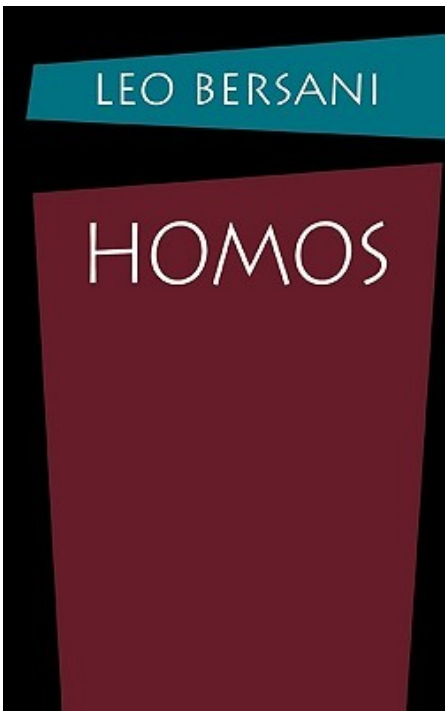

Homos

Leo Bersani

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Homos Leo Bersani
In this work, Leo Bersani addresses homosexuality in modern culture. In his chapters on contemporary queer theory, on Foucault and psychoanalysis, on the politics of sadomasochism, and on the image of the gay outlaw in works by Gide, Proust and Genet, Bersani raises the possibility that same-sex desire by its very nature can disrupt oppressive social orders.

Homos Details

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From Reader Review Homos for online ebook

Brenden O'Donnell says

I was prepared to read this book as a prequel to Edelman's _No Future_, and I can't decide if that's what I got. In some ways, Bersani predates Edelman, but in others, he goes much further. Edelman is clearly influenced by Bersani's resistance to dominant social orders via an extremely threatening "outlaw existence" (76). Where they seem to diverge is that Bersani finds this existence compelling, and Edelman finds it mundane.

Bersani pushes for us to see the productivity of existing as queer outlaws: they allow us to trace "a theory of love based not on our assertions of how different and how much better we are than those who would do away with us (because we are neither that different nor that much better), but one that would instead be grounded in the very contradictions, impossibilities, and antagonisms brought to light by any serious genealogy of desire" (108). This is a pretty strong case for what, in Bersani's footsteps, will be come to be known as "queer negativity." If a queer outlaw existence allows us to redefine love in a way that encapsulates all the negativity queerness connotes, then there is, ironically, something positive about queer negativity.

Of course, Edelman deflates this possibility. More than ever, I understand the gravity of his argument. For Edelman, all that a queer outlaw existence accomplishes is a demand for culture to recognize the dramatic negativity that has become its symptom.

After reading _Homos_, the question I have is, in acknowledging Bersani's work, does Edelman resist or simply downplay the possibility Bersani suggests? Of course, Edelman would have us think that he resists it, that it is unimportant, so that the negativity of his rhetorical force can really affect us. But, logically, I don't think the two arguments conflict very much. Edelman just, albeit importantly, fleshes out the truly negative manifestation of Bersani's work. Hopefully, a re-reading of _No Future_ will answer this question.

6655321 says

i don't necessarily agree with Bersani and i think a lot of his arguements are purely theoretical reflection; but it's undeniable he brings up some solid questions & puts out some really good turns of phrase

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Jee Koh says

Same-Sex Desire, Again

In this 1995 book, Bersani begins with a stark statement: “No one wants to be called a homosexual.” He is not thinking, primarily, of closeted gay men or women, but the aversion to “homosexuality” on the part of self-identified homosexual activists and theorists.

According to Bersani, queer theorists like Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, and Michael Warner have taken “queer” to delineate political rather than erotic tendencies. In their writing, they have erased the specificity of gay identity in favor of transcendence over the homo-hetero binary, or of social constructivism, or of

historicizing the category; these theorists fear, rightly, to essentialize gay identity, a move that would fall in with heterosexist practice.

Though he is opposed, like the other theorists, to essentialist definitions, Bersani wants to reinstate the specificity of gay identity—same-sex desire—because one needs to oppose heterosexism on behalf of something, from the position of somewhere, however compromised something or somewhere is. His most potent argument against the erasure of gay identity is that such erasure is exactly what homophobia aims to accomplish. The first two chapters develop that argument in detail, with references to America in the early 1990s.

The next chapter argues that S/M merely replicates the power structures in the outside world, and does not question, let alone change, those structures, unlike what its advocates, including Michel Foucault, say. The chapter supports the overarching argument, that some strands of current queer theory are not as gay-affirmative as they make themselves out to be.

The last chapter, titled “The Gay Outlaw,” expands on what Bersani sees as the need to destroy all relationism first, constructed as it is by oppression, before we can see the way forward to a new idea of relations and community. To figure forth that idea, he analyzes Gide’s *The Immoralist*, Proust’s *Sodam and Gomorrah*, and Genet’s *Funeral Rites*.

The book is a stimulating read, written in readable prose, without too much theoretical jargon. I agree with the need to keep the specificity of gay identity while keeping out essentialist definitions. Though “queer” intends to be inclusive, to describe behavior instead of essence, I want to think of myself as “gay” because that denotes, particularly, my sexual attraction to men.

I am not so easy with the idea of destroying relationism in order to revolutionize oppressive structures. As Bersani admits, the idea is very far from being a political program. To my mind, the idea is also far too literary, supported as it is by literary analysis. Bersani describes Genet’s “revolutionary strength” thus:

Both his abhorrent glorification of Nazism and his in some ways equally abhorrent failure to take that glorification seriously express his fundamental project of *declining to participate in any sociality at all* [author’s italics].

One might ask why one should read an anti-social writer for clues to changing society. Bersani’s answer is that Genet compels us to re-think what we mean and what we want from community. Still, Bersani’s language of revolution runs counter to Karl Popper’s argument that, given our limited knowledge, social change must be wrought in incremental steps, through the deployment of social technology, instead of resorting to revolution and wiping the slate clean. The homosexual as outlaw is too tempting an idea not to resist.

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jtabz says

"So, I hear Jean Genet was orally impregnated by imagining himself eating his dead lover's waste, thus allowing him to expel said dead lover as a world of new images and establishing the potential fertility of rimming."

"You don't say?"

"Unfortunately, I just did."

Carl says

oh, leo bersani, what great titles you have...

Michael says

I largely picked up Leo Bersani's *Homos* because it is well known in queer theory for the formulation of the anti-social thesis, which posits that there is something inherently anti-social about homo-ness. Some extensive notes:

Bersani's prologue begins by discussing a danger he sees in much queer theory: the critique of the supposed naturalness of straight, gay, and lesbian identities is much needed, but "they are not necessarily liberating" (4) because they often erase sex ("*desexualizing* discourses") and because "the dominant heterosexual society doesn't need our belief in its own naturalness in order to continue exercising and enjoying the privileges of dominance" (5). Bersani's approach, then, is in part a continued critique of the naturalness of sexuality, but also an attempt to find something liberating about non-heterosexuality, as well as continuing to privilege the sexuality of homosexuality.

He posits his anti-social thesis of queer theory: "Perhaps inherent in gay desire is a revolutionary inaptitude for heteroized sociality. THis of course means sociality as we know it, and the most politically disruptive aspect of the homo-ness I will be exploring in gay desire is a redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself" (7).

Chapter 1 explores homophobia, noting that "homophobic America itself appears to have an insatiable appetite for our presence" (11). While acceptance of queers has grown, so has anti-queer activism and homophobia. Bersani believes that part of acceptance is also related to the expectation that queers will all die of AIDS (this was published in 1995): "In fact, no one can stop looking. But we might wonder if AIDS, in addition to transforming gay men into infinitely fascinating taboos, has also made it *less dangerous* to look. For, our projects and our energies notwithstanding, others may think of themselves as watching us disappear" (21). Homophobia is also a unique type of hatred: racism depends upon the existence of non-whites, but homophobia does not depend on the existence of homosexuals. It is, instead, "entirely a response to an internal possibility" of being homosexual oneself (27). Of course, homosexuality cannot be eradicated, and thus, homophobia, "itself the sign of the ineradicability of homosexuality, [. . .:] must remain" (29).

Chapter 2 involves detailed engagements with Wittig, Butler, Halperin, and Warner, whom Bersani charges, among other things, for desexualizing discourse about queers. Bersani then argues that "unless we define how the sexual specificity of being queer (a specificity perhaps common to the myriad ways of being queer and the myriad conditions in which one is queer) gives queers a special aptitude for making that challenge [to institutions:], we are likely to come up with a remarkably familiar, and merely liberal, version of it [that

challenge:]" (72-73). Bersani pushes these theorists for not being radical enough. For Bersani, "There is a more radical possibility: *homo-ness itself necessitates a massive redefining of relationality*. More fundamental than a resistance to the normalizing methodologies is a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known" (76).

Chapter 3 is a strong critique of discourses about sadomasochism, many of which argue that there is something liberating about S/M because of the ways in which partners switch roles and play with power. But Bersani is more skeptical: "Sometimes it seems that if anything in society is being challenged, it is not the networks of power and authority, but the exclusion of gays from those networks" (85). Bersani argues that S/M doesn't challenge privilege—it leaves privilege in tact and extends privilege (temporarily), making S/M "profoundly conservative in that its imagination of pleasure is almost entirely defined by the dominant culture to which it thinks of itself as giving 'a stinging slap in the face'" (87). Sure, S/M plays with power, but it doesn't critique privilege and authority.

Chapter 4 is where Bersani really outlines his anti-social theory, asking "Should a homosexual be a good citizen?" (113). Through his readings of Gide, Proust, and Genet, Bersani shows how homo-ness can constitute "a political threat [. . .:] because of the energies it releases, energies made available for the unprecedented projects of human organization" (123). Homo-ness, which involves a "self-shattering" (101), and thus a loss of the self and thus a loss of citizenship (125). Bersani proposes that Gide helps to reimagine relationality in ways that do not involve property, but in order to do this, we need to "imagine a new erotics" (128). Proust, according to Bersani, "point[s:] us in the direction of a community in which relations would no longer be held hostage to demands of intimate knowledge of the other" (151). Even more so, Genet helps us to disentangle erotics from intimacy (165). Ultimately, Bersani's reading becomes an exhort for revolt that rejects relationally: "without such a rejection, social revolt is doomed to repeat the oppressive conditions the provoked the revolt" (172) because "Revolt allows for new agents to fill the slots of master and slave, but it does not necessarily involve a new imagining of how to structure human relations. Structures of oppression outlive agents of oppression" (174). As Bersani understands oppression, "In a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only what society throws off—its mistakes or its pariahs—can serve the future" (180).
