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—*Censorship; Contagion; Heterosexism; History; Literature; Pedophilia; Sports; Suicide*.

SELF-HATRED. *See* Shame

SEXUAL PERVERSIONS. *See* Perversions

## SHAME

Like other stigmatized groups, gays and lesbians are, in many respects, “children of shame.” Many of their personal stories are marked by periods of uneasiness and discomfort that show the difficulty of living in a heterosexual world consisting of repeated abasements, sometimes real, sometimes imagined; sometimes open, sometimes secret. Whether before they come out or long after, gays and lesbians face a relentless and cruel treatment by society, and the growing knowledge of belonging to a class of “unsuitable” people whom society does not want, which they are reminded of on a daily basis. Shame is a feeling of vulnerability that is universal, but not experienced equally across all categories of individuals. In theory, we are all equal in face of shame, but in the real social world, some are more “equal” than others. It is this inequality of fragility and vulnerability among social groups where a clearly political analysis of shame can be identified, as well as its strategic function in the heterosexist economy.

Shame is one of the most powerful mechanisms by which social order holds us in our presumed place in society, either by preventing “normal people” from straying from the “right path,” or by provoking “abnormal people” to hide and remain out of sight by not

publicly acknowledging their membership in a socially undesirable category. Even amongst the most happy and proud of being out, homosexual shame can exist in those afflicted for a long time, resurfacing at the most unexpected moments when one thought it had been long overcome (and staying with them until their death). As Didier Eribon writes: “There always is, at the turn of every sentence, a wound that can reopen; a new shame that can submerge me, or the old shame coming back to the surface.” As the political result of the collective oppression, reproduced in a series of daily interactions, the shame suffered by gays and lesbians cannot be opposed except collectively in turn: it is a mechanism often too well anchored in our bodies, our subjectivities and in the objective structures of heterosexist society, to be simply revoked individually.

### *Shame: The Political Result of Oppression*

As in any sentiment, even the most personal and intimate, shame does not drop out of the sky: it is part of a corporal economy which is a *political* economy. To “persist in its being,” any economic and social order (whether capitalist, racist, sexist or homophobic) must make itself be recognized as legitimate, and to persist over time it must be internalized by those whom it subjugates. The heterosexist order exists according to this rule; it would have little impact if it were based purely on intellectual and rhetorical grounds. Through shame, the “objective” power of homophobia is in fact based on concrete reality: human beings are not pure spirits floating above society, but flesh and blood, socialized bodies composed of acquired reflexes and conscious dispositions, rendering them more or less controllable. It is this fundamental “corporality” that allows homophobia to function. In this way, in shame or in fear, in imposed or self-imposed **discretion**, or even the feeling of ridiculousness of inappropriateness, one’s submission to the heterosexist order can take place against one’s will, without having any power to change it. All of these social emotions can arise in us and take action against us seemingly against our will, exploiting the “subterranean complicities” (to use French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept) that our conditioned bodies maintain with the consistencies and hierarchies of the dominant society. There is no need to imagine a homophobic conspiracy or a cynical orchestration of the oppression to understand how this phenomenon is possible. In fact, having been instructed in the inequality of the world, homosexuals are predisposed

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mentally and physically to recognize its social divisions and structures of authority, thereby (paradoxically) conferring upon homophobia part of the power that it exercises on them. In shame, the body in a sense "betrays" the soul by forcing the gay subject to perceive himself through the eyes of others (whether real or supposed) that is, in the end, through the heterosexist vision of the world. What is revealed by the durable power of shame in the lives of gays and lesbians is that their bodies often remain in the closet a lot longer than their will does. The human body, which allows us to open up to the world in order to understand it and act within it, is also the organ that at the same time makes us vulnerable to it: it is through this assumption that I give in to the prevailing social order ("It's stronger than me"), giving the structures and agents of homophobia the power to awaken my shame in the most ill-timed fashion, while at the same time I know so well that I "should not be ashamed" more than I "should not be ashamed anymore."

Shame feeds on a self-hatred that goes beyond its gay subjects because it is never completely individual nor completely conscious; it refers back to the incorporation of the original slights directed toward them by others. But this homophobia interiorized as "fear of the other within oneself" is not limited to fueling the shame in the social and psychological fire: it is often also projected into a "hate of oneself in the other," that is, a rejection of homosexuals other than oneself, in spite of common stigma (or rather because of it). Shame does not only "discipline" those who are dominated one by one, by isolating them from "sacred" society, it can also divide them *among themselves* by making their mutual identification, and thus their political mobilization, more difficult. Shame promotes isolation, which in turn promotes shame: without consciously meaning to do so, the heterosexist world is surprisingly efficient.

Michael Warner, in his book *The Trouble with Normal*, he distinguishes between shame (which concerned only acts) and stigma (which touched on the essential being of individuals, according to the definition of their social essence). To ignore this would blur the distinction between the voluntary transgression of the normal, universal individual who is satisfied with living within his social or sexual limit, and the abjection of the stigmatized individual beyond the very acts that he committed or was accused of committing and who accepts the infamous identity that is imposed on him,

sometimes for life. Stigma is a form of fundamental and permanent shame which taints acts before they even really exist; there is as much political distance between transgression and abjection as there is between free communication with the unchaste and the mere fact of being *identified* with the unchaste by society.

Such a distinction, however, must not dismiss the common (at least in Western society) metaphysical vision of the world which understands the acts of social subjects to be a revelation of their inner self. In reality, the impact of shame always exceeds that of the acts that may have caused it; the shameful act then becomes interchangeable with the essence (or image) of its author. Conversely, categories of stigmatized individuals such as gays and lesbians are conscious of their structural social fragility that renders them vulnerable to situations and interactions in which this insecurity can be activated and exploited. The shame experienced by homosexuals is then mutually reinforced by the stigma related to their social identity.

#### *Shame: A Corporeal Emotion*

Shame, as a typically corporeal emotion, is in fact a consequence of the contradictory hate found in all forms of racism, which involves people criticizing someone for his own nature (over which he has no control) so that he then blames himself for it while at the same time affirming that he himself is not responsible for it.

Homophobia as sexual racism has a sort of oxymoronic concept at its core: homosexuality as an immoral pathology whereby the homosexual is an incorrigible person to be corrected (confirmed by the reactionary response to AIDS as a shameful disease). We understand, as a consequence, that shame is weighed down by this paradoxical feeling of being at fault without having done anything, of feeling simply "out of place," discredited by one's own essence. This emotion, tragic in its signification, is that much more intense and cruel when, as is often the case, the awareness of betraying one's shame to the outside is added to it.

When shame erupts, whether through an intentional or unintentional act by oneself or by others, it is expressed in tangible manifestations of vulnerability and powerlessness, such as blushing, sweating, and shaking. These manifestations represent an urgent and irrepressible wish to disappear from the social scene, to run away and hide; and in a certain way, to suppress oneself: if not, not to be anymore, than at least, not

to be there anymore. In other words, shame takes the homophobic stigma at its word: since for this society, a "wrong" sexual orientation makes one's entire being no longer pertinent, and hence that being looks for a way to revoke itself in a tragic attempt at regression. And since this being sticks to one's skin, the body tries to achieve this regression (to make itself small; to be discreet) for the sake of the mind. Symptoms of shame express the failure of one's being to achieve this regression. Everyone, at one time or another, can find themselves in this kind of situation that is so all-encompassing and so humiliating. But for many gays and lesbians, particularly those who do not live in large urban centers and their protective communities, this is real life. Before even being situational, gay shame is an existential shame.

Further, the shame experienced by gays and lesbians is something more specific than the humiliation incurred by other categories of those who are socially or economically dominated. It is not limited to the feeling of being irrelevant socially, or to representing a lack of taste or comfort in social and familial situations, but is also a painful recognition that even in one's *mode of jouissance*, one is abnormal; that is, in a position linked to the forfeiture and absence of control whereby the subject is at his most vulnerable in his humanity (and if it is a man, in his virility). That said, it is precisely this mode of *jouissance* that is supposed to define, according to the dominating "regime of truth" (as defined by Michel Foucault), a person's essence. Of course, this focus on *jouissance* has nothing that is "natural": on the contrary, it is a political construction that exploits the historical development of modesty (there is no shame without modesty) in "civilized" societies, to drive back the practices and persons that do not fit the dominant definition of normality.

Shame is thus total and reductive at the same time. Homophobic attitudes reduce gay identity to an orientation that is solely sexual and makes the sexual, thought of in terms of tendencies and of drives that are always more or less associated with animal acts, the origin of all actions and thoughts of gays and lesbians. Their entire being, then, becomes identified as a sort of "perverse drive." This is why homophobia does not only consider them as socially inadequate but also, and perhaps even, predominantly immodest. For heterosexual society, homosexuals are in a way "itinerant provocations": by the very fact that their sexuality is irregular, homophobic attitudes reduce them to nothing

but their sexuality, and in doing so multiplies the inappropriateness of the abnormality by the indecency of **exhibitionism** (imposed by the enquiring and hypocritical look of domineering and moralistic people). By being so reduced through this scrutiny, homosexuals find themselves dispossessed of their **privacy**, their intimacy existing only to be ridiculed and symbolically exhibited as a negative example. No matter what gays and lesbians do to "desexualize" their identity, sometimes to the extreme, the end result is always the same: their very presence is an affront to decency and "good manners," subject to slurs, if not open **violence**.

In the context of someone who is "out of turn" with respect to the system of "normative" sexual development, while at the same time reduced to an animal and sexual drive, facing a society in which the "civilizing process" precisely tends to push the bodily sexual drives back into the sphere of intimacy and privacy (i.e. hidden), homosexual shame is then a privileged rapport with the feeling not only of being dirty, but also being dirty in public, that is, in an inappropriate and shocking situation. The homophobic world projects its own indecency and fascinated voyeurism onto this inverted being, who becomes the phantasmic spectacle of a dirty *jouissance*, and imposes on him the social humiliation of a symbolic nudity—nudity that is in reality both produced and evaded by the very look that undresses him, all the while accusing him of **scandal**. Shame is the result of gays' and lesbians' internalization of this dominant vision of themselves that reduces their being to a nude body which exhibits itself and its private organs, this body that possesses an animal drive, and a drive to dirtiness. It is the manifestation of a form of bodily allegiance to the idea that what is revealed about them (or threatened to be) returns them to something fundamental in the definition of their character, and that this "something" in his body or mind should or should have remained hidden. More radically, shame extorts the gay subject with the belief in the myth that there is really "something" to hide or reveal. Homophobia's strength is to create, at the same time and in the same move, shame of this "thing" and the thing we should be ashamed of.

#### *Gays & Lesbians Between Shame & Pride*

Through reductions, rejections, and threatening mechanisms, and their conscious and unconscious anticipations, shame directs gays and lesbians to become invisible by hiding themselves. Not in the sense

of privileged invisibility reserved for dominant forces of the universe, whose identities are a given, and who do not have to tell of themselves or admit themselves (never "Mommy, I am heterosexual"); this invisibility is that of the "good soldier," the one who sticks so much to the landscape that he ends up part of the social furniture. The invisibility stigma that gays incur is altogether different: it is the invisibility of oppressed, inhibited, inexpressible, unthinkable identities. The one who would prefer that none of that existed and had never existed. This way, if pride makes even more sense for gays and lesbians than for blacks (from whom they borrow the concept historically), it is that their invisibilization by shame has been one of the main means by which symbolic domination has been exerted upon them. The construction of gay identity, either personally or collectively, works precisely to resist this mechanism. Gay pride aims to regain gay identity by subverting the stigma of homosexuality, as much private as public, and by disarming its critics by reclaiming the identity originally assigned to it by homophobic society (the word "queer" is a good example): Pride is thus first and foremost a political strategy, and those who see it as simply misplaced narcissism demonstrate a refusal to face the facts and mechanisms of oppression. A mobilized gay and lesbian community serves not only as a means to political mobilization but also, more on a daily level, as protective shelter that allows gays to reconstruct their identities away from the domineering hierarchy whose beliefs, when internalized, produce shame and self-hatred.

Some, such as François Delor, however, insist on certain perverse effects of the pressure to feel pride, which can in turn be shameful; for gays and lesbians who cannot be proud, a shame arises from the fact of being ashamed. But how can one give shame its dignity back and not reduce it to a strictly negative side of identity without putting oneself on the side of oppressors by defending a reactionary discourse? If we really are children of shame, is there a way to remove ourselves from this matrix without at the same time being blinded by the slighting of our shameful origins? To help solve this dilemma and bring about a new perspective on gay shame, one should take note of the paradox at its heart: on one hand, it is another insidious form of the heterosexist order, with all its laws and hierarchies; on the other, it is a founding experience of gay and lesbian subjectivity, if not positive, then at least productive.

If it is shame that constitutes us, it is also shame that

connects us: entering shame is at the same time acknowledging what we are, who we are, and to whom we are joined through the common experience of the homophobic social order. The just valorization of pride must not lead one to forget one's whole emotional life lived in shame or in the voids of oppression, of the perverse eroticization of its instruments and agents (which could be a way to disarm opponents and initiate a process toward pride, as Genet said) for the social and political awakening that this shame and the marginality that it imposes helps to produce and nourish. Just as pride always bears the mark of its shameful genealogy ("One is always a little ashamed of being proud of being gay," writes Guy Hocquenghem), shame, when fully assumed, when one ceases to be ashamed of being ashamed, contains a form of paradoxical pride which, explains Eribon, could constitute the starting point for self-reinvention toward something like our freedom.

—Sébastien Chauvin

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—*Abnormal; Closet, the; Exhibitionism; Heterophobia; Heterosexism; Privacy; Rhetoric; Suicide.*