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GAY NEW YORK

Michel Foucault's powerful writing brought the history of sexuality to the forefront of academic discussions in the 1970's.¹ Since then, histories of sexuality have multiplied and enriched our understanding of social organization in past cultures. George Chauncey contributes a landmark work in this historiography with his book, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*. The primary achievement of this work is to refute the common conception that gay Americans were repressed and in the "closet" before the sexual revolution of the 1960's. Before *Gay New York*, virtually all studies of sexuality in the United States focused on post WWII gay activism. By illuminating the thriving gay sub-culture in New York around the turn of the 20th century, Chauncey forces historians to acknowledge a more complicated narrative of American social progress. An interesting story within the story—at least for historians—is how Chauncey was able to research a subject defined by its secrecy. His years of work searching for relevant sources among disparate archives enables him to write a history that brings to life mainstream American society as much as the creation of the gay community in New York.

Researching the history of sexuality is inherently difficult. For one, "most people sought to conceal their gay lives from the police and others."² Chauncey, during his preparation for the book, was repeatedly told that the sources were just not there. Through patient and creative research, however, he was able to find numerous sources in criminal court records and the

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1976)

² George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 365

archives of the anti-vice societies that proliferated during the Progressive Era. Ironically, it was the agencies that sought to eradicate homosexuality that provide historians with the largest collection of records on gay Americans of the past. The Committee of Fourteen, for example, is heavily cited in *Gay New York*. Founded in 1905, the Committee hired investigators to provide surveillance of saloons and disreputable street corners. Because its primary concern was illegal alcohol distribution and prostitution, gay men are only indirectly mentioned. Therefore, in order to make use of this source, Chauncey had to search through thousands of records and familiarize himself with the jargon of the era—“wolves,” “punks,” and others. An additional challenge to the historian is the hostile tone of these sources. Progressive reformers and criminal court judges viewed homosexuality as a sin and a danger to society. For a sympathetic perspective of gay culture, it is necessary to look elsewhere.

There are a surprising number of gay-friendly sources. Diaries and memoirs by gay men provided an intimate, behind-the-scenes look at gay culture before WWII. Donald Vining’s *A Gay Diary* is a notable example. Chauncey was aware he needed to reference sources that weren’t pejorative of his subject matter, so he took the extra steps necessary to gain the trust of family members and partners who were in possession of gay men’s personal recollections. Of course, these sources have challenges of their own, namely a myopic perspective and self-misrepresentation, but their insight into gay culture from within is valuable. Dr. Kinsey’s surveys are commendable for their lack of judgment. And, although their statistics are of dubious accuracy, Chauncey was able to use their data to confirm his theories on sexual identification (this will be addressed in more detail later). Lastly, newspapers were an unexpected treasure trove for information on gay night life and cultural events. More “respectable” publications like the *New York Times* did not cover much gay activity, but the

Broadway Brevities and other gossip-sheets occasionally mentioned balls and vaudeville shows. Chauncey's important insight was to recognize that in the early 1900's there was a much wider range of options for printed news than exists today. Using this variety of hostile and sympathetic sources Chauncey was able to depict the creation of a gay community in New York in the context of a changing America.

America was undergoing dramatic changes in between 1890 and 1940. Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" of 1893 challenged a post-expansion American identity. Many believed the lack of wilderness opportunity would weaken the American male, a serious threat to a society well-versed in Social Darwinism. The relative affluence and domesticity available to average men exacerbated that concern; compared to the rough-and-tumble immigrants, native American Protestants were "soft." In addition, women's suffragists were challenging the rights of men to exclusive leadership. The combined effect of these affronts to the status quo resulted in a determined effort to establish moral order. The Progressive movement can be seen as the manifestation of that effort. Their efforts to enforce morality provided the social context in which the gay community of New York established itself.

In *Gay New York* Chauncey brings to life a thriving gay community that changes both how the past is understood and also how homosexuality is understood today. In the 1890's and early 20th century sexuality was not conceived in the contemporary dichotomy of hetero and homosexual. Instead, men were seen as either masculine or feminine, depending on their preferred role in sexual intercourse. What this means—and this is where the modern reader might be surprised—is that men who engaged in sexual intimacy with other men, but played the "manly" role, were not stigmatized as abnormal. In fact, it was seen as a reasonable decision by a man unable to find a willing woman partner. This historical insight undermines the heretofore

“natural” distinction between homo and heterosexual people. It appears that the contemporary understanding is a social and not biological construct. There are other important insights in *Gay New York*; however, a thorough examination of them would add undue length to this short article. Suffice to say here that Chauncey explains the role of class in gay communities, and also the profound influence of Prohibition and World War I on these communities.

So far, this article has sought to demonstrate the excellence of Chauncey’s scholarship. In order to provide a complete review of his work, however, it is also necessary to critique his weaker arguments. The primary flaw of *Gay New York* was an apparent contradiction between forces suppressing and invigorating the gay community. In one area of the book Chauncey emphasizes the societal changes that forced the gay community underground (women’s suffrage, Progressive morality, etc.), while at other times he describes how this same era developed a sexual revolution (Prohibition, World War I). He does not argue that both were happening together in a complex interaction, instead he seems to use the examples that best suit his argument at the time. Further, Chauncey is unclear in his use of dates and statistics. Why, for example, does he start with 1890? He doesn’t explain. It is conceivable that the gay culture Chauncey describes existed long before this time. Also, in his attempt to convince the reader of the large social presence of gays during this era, he uses vague terminology like “many.” For example, he writes that “many men alternated between male and female sexual partners”³ But nowhere can the reader find statistics to verify this controversial claim. Lastly, the book would have been strengthened by including lesbians into the study. Chauncey addresses this in his introduction, stating that adding lesbians was outside the scope of the book, but the impression is that he simply tackled the subject he was most interested in.

³ *Ibid.*, 65

The creative methodology behind and powerful insights in *Gay New York* make this work special. Its humane treatment of alternative sexuality recovers a part of American history that had been “forced into hiding in 1930’s 40’s, and 50’s.”⁴ Chauncey’s academic courage in unearthing this history is laudable. At the time of his writing he was told gay histories were so taboo as to be career-ending. Proposition 8 in California, which was religiously backed anti-gay legislation, demonstrates that the same forces which criminalized and marginalized gay citizens in the past are alive and well today. In this context, *Gay New York* takes its place among the rare academic works that can serve to make a real impact on society.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8