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Pedophilia, Homosexuality and Gay and Lesbian Activism

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Pedophilia is undoubtedly one of the main contemporary sexual taboos and a broadly condemned form of sexual activity. Sexual scandals involving minors lead to massive public uproar and laws against child sexual abuse have been strengthened worldwide. However, by examining the past, a more complex picture surrounding this phenomenon is unveiled. Although pedophilia has never been widely encouraged or accepted, the societal taboo was definitively less pervasive in recent history.

As will be shown here, the era of sexual revolution was a very specific period for debates regarding pedophilia. Pedophiles made themselves publicly known and attempted to set up special-interest organisations. Other groups, particularly within gay communities, endorsed part of their claims and defended the need for solidarity between sexual minorities. Both the content and the forms of these debates and arguments were undoubtedly influenced by the spirit and the rhetoric of (homo) sexual liberation.

This chapter serves as an attempt to better understand this intriguing moment in the history of sexuality. The goal is to overcome normative discussions surrounding the extent of sexual liberation by shifting the debate towards an investigation of sexual change. Therefore, neither the moral validity of pedophile relations nor the impact of sexual activity of adults with children will be discussed. Relying on my own expertise on the history of homosexual movements, this chapter rather seeks to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of change within a particular social movement. This analysis highlights past discussions on pedophilia within gay groups,¹ the various failed attempts to seriously politicise the issue, and speculates about the reasons for the disappearance of these controversies. By focusing on social-movement discourses and

strategies, this chapter does not look at sexual practices between adults and sexual minors per se, but rather examines the ways these were debated at a very specific time in history. In other words, it wants to map the extent of change over time and to investigate potential cross-national variations. It also discusses factors which could contribute to the understanding of the gradual erasure of serious debates surrounding these controversies in recent times.

Beyond a documentation of the past, this study is crucial because these controversies regularly resurface today: not because some people use these prior arguments to ask for the legalisation of cross-generational relations, but rather because past statements are frequently used to delegitimise certain public figures. In recent years, leading politicians such as David Norris, Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Jürgen Trittin have been under attack for past statements about cross-generational sexual activities in countries such as Ireland, France and Germany.

Finally, this analysis of movement discourses and strategies is a reflection on the process of sexual revolution itself.² The latter is indeed often depicted as a long emancipation process and is usually described as the gradual achievement of the ideals of sexual freedom, equality and self-determination.³ As recently discussed by Pierre Verdrager for the French case, those in defence of pedophilia also shared this conception of change.⁴ They often thought that sexual liberation would follow a trajectory consisting of several steps, and that cross-generational relations would eventually come to the forefront. However, this specific form of 'liberation' never took place, raising a key theoretical question: Is sexual revolution, necessarily, a linear and gradual process?

Back to a recent past

Before discussing the importance of change and trying to explain why activist discourses changed over recent decades, it is important to remember the actual substance of the debates about pedophilia in the era of sexual revolution across Europe. These have indeed changed significantly as exemplified by the foreword of French philosopher René Schérer in a new edition of his book *L'Émile perversi* (2006):

I could be asked why this book should be reprinted today. It was imagined and written at the beginning of the 1970s, and concerns from this time seem now really far away. It was a time of illusions, which are lost today and which have been replaced by bitter but allegedly more solid certainties. ... Then, people wanted to make

life more intense, to 'enjoy without hindrance', to forbid to forbid. Liberation in all domains was on the agenda. 'What do we want? Everything, now', 'Everything is possible'. Students' rebellions were succeeded by revolts in high schools, and extended them by interrogating adults as a whole. The critique of authoritarian education was naturally leading to exiting the schools and, by the same token, to praising infantile passions and glorifying a sexuality known as lively and polymorphous, a sexuality that could be experienced and was waiting to be experienced. ... The key question, that a sexual revolution understood as a real revolution which entailed all the groups which had been constrained, oppressed, confined in an ashaming clandestinity, was spreading from adults to teenagers; to pupils at their youngest age. Our motto was not to be afraid, not to hesitate.⁵

In this quotation, Schérer – who wrote extensively on the issue of pedophilia and significantly contributed to campaigns to decriminalise cross-generational relations with other leading intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Guy Hocquenghem in the 1970s⁶ – draws a clear link between sexual revolution and sexual liberation. He displays a political approach to cross-generational relations and calls upon more freedom for 'infantile' passions and 'puerile erotics' both between minors *and* across generations.⁷ Undoubtedly nostalgic, he describes a break between a definitively abrogated – yet not so distant – past and the certitudes of the contemporary era. The world depicted by Schérer is presented as conceptually far away, and Schérer himself, despite publishing several books on this issue from 1974 to 1979, prefers nowadays to avoid the discussion altogether. This chapter intends to better understand this wider dramatic change.

A key theoretical issue

René Schérer has contributed extensively to the academic reflection on minors' sexualities, cross-generational relationships and pedagogy. Teaching Philosophy at Vincennes University, where he worked with Foucault and Deleuze, he was strongly influenced by Husserl and Fourier and, participating in the anti-authoritarian mood of the time, claimed that the issue of pedophilia was intrinsically political. In the aforementioned *Émile perversi*, in which he examines the relationships between sexuality and pedagogy, he utilises Bentham's panopticon to describe the role of social control in children's sexuality. Furthermore, Schérer has also published on the issue with Guy Hocquenghem and contributed to the 1979 issue of *Recherches*, entitled *Fous d'enfance: qui*

a peur des pédophiles [Fond of children: who is afraid of paedophiles], which included pieces by Michel Foucault, Jean Danet and Gabriel Matzneff. Moreover, Schérer played a key part in the struggle for the assertion of sexual rights for minors before being prosecuted (and later discharged) in the Coral Affair.⁸

Schérer was not alone, either in France – where novelists Tony Duvert and Gabriel Matzneff also contributed to public debates – or in Europe. As confirmed by the use of a liberationist rhetoric, such discourses were part of a moment of sexual transformation to which Schérer contributed, for instance through his intellectual and intimate friendship with Guy Hocquenghem. As shown by the work of André Gide, Roger Peyrefitte, Thomas Mann, Benjamin Britten and Vladimir Nabokov, pedophilia was not a new topic. However, something distinct happened at the end of the 1960s. Along with numerous sexual desires and practices, pedophilia became politicised and examined through the prism of liberation.⁹

This was true both at a theoretical level and among social movements. Inspirers of sexual revolution, such as Wilhem Reich and Herbert Marcuse, had shown interest for minors' sexuality and cross-generational relations. If Reich defended a rather conventional model of 'natural' or 'authentic' sexuality relying on heterosexual complementarity, he also decisively contributed to the study of children's sexuality.¹⁰ Marcuse claimed that 'perversions' had to play a specific role in the path from capitalistic sexual repression towards the achievement of polymorphous sexuality.¹¹ Furthermore, as reminded by Weeks, perversions included pedophilia in Marcuse's thinking and were conceived as 'a revolt against the procreative norm, pointing to a fuller meaning of Eros, where the drive towards life represented the realisation of the full possibilities of the body'.¹²

Key authors and activists from the gay liberation movement also discussed the topic. In *Homosexual Desire*, Guy Hocquenghem, once Schérer's pupil and beloved, depicts the youth as a particularly oppressed sexual group and rejects the idea that inter-generational relations necessarily imply abuse. He wrote:

There is one category among the oppressed which inspires a particular degree of civilised concern: the young, the sexual minors. The Oedipus complex is based on the succession of the generations, and on the conflict between child and adult. It is obviously the adult who leads the child astray; if there is a homosexual between the two of them, it is inevitably the adult. Now many young people are

affirming their desire to be seduced, their right to dispose of their own sexuality.¹³

Similarly, Italian theorist Mario Mieli, another key figure of gay liberation,¹⁴ confers a specific role to sexual perversions in his quest for 'the complete desinhibition and a liberation of the profound hermaphrodite nature of desire', including pederasty and ephebophilia.¹⁵

A movement issue

These reflexions were not only theoretical. As shown by Leila Rupp, Theo Sandfort and Julian Jackson, debates on pedophilia were not new within homosexual activism. In her study about the International Committee for Sexual Equality, Rupp emphasises the role played by the eroticisation of young men in homophile groups of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁶ The failed project of a pedophilia conference in 1960 and controversies about the Danish magazine *Vennen* show that cross-generational intercourse was already a source of dissent. However, Rupp emphasises that the attraction to boys was part of European homosexual culture during that time. Inspired by ancient canons of homosexuality and masculinity, pederasty provided both iconographic references and aesthetic ideals. Similarly, in a study about pedophilia within the Dutch homosexual organisation COC, Theo Sandfort shows that pedophilia was not seen as an independent category until 1958.¹⁷ Pedophiles were rather presented as a subcategory of homosexuals, which explains the absence of specific pedophile groups. Finally, Julian Jackson discusses the presence of debates about cross-generational sex within the French organisation Arcadie.¹⁸ Influenced by writers such as Roger Peyrefitte and André Gide, this presence was nonetheless circumscribed to cultural production (novels, drawings and so on). According to Julian Jackson, this was a major difference with the 1970s when Arcadie moved to more political claims under the influence of gay liberation movements.

As argued by Jackson, there would be a specific way of addressing pedophilia within gay liberation groups. This is confirmed by documents from this time such as the *Rapport contre la normalité* published by the French Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire (FHAR, or Homosexual Revolutionary Action Front) in 1971. It stated:

We want to destroy THE NOTION OF MINOR, because it is a phallogocratic notion of inequality. ... WE REFUSE THE VALUES OF THE PRIVILEGED CLASS, and the notion of minor, which etymologically tends to reduce us to the status of minor beings, inferior, less

important because we are not yet mature and educated. BUT WE CONSIDER OURSELVES AS ALREADY FULL BEINGS, with all freedoms and responsibilities. We refuse being educated, molded after the age of adults, polished to fit well in their mould, in a space reserved by society and that we will not have built. We claim our right to free education, to self determination, to experience... .. We want to enjoy (*jouir*) from now. We claim our right to dispose of ourselves, our right to pleasure'.¹⁹

A bit further in the same book, someone, who signs as 'a minor of the FHAR', reports about the development of 'groups of minors who want to be corrupted' in some high schools and private homes in Paris.²⁰

Similarly, the Spanish Front d'Alliberament Gai de Catalunya (Catalan Gay Liberation Front), and the Coordinadora de Frentes de Liberación Homosexual del Estado Español (Coordination of Homosexual Liberation Fronts of the Spanish State) asked for the abrogation of all articles related to the corruption of minors, for the age of consent to be lowered to 14 years, for the development of a sexual education in which sexuality is presented as a 'source of pleasure and personal intercommunication' and a 'public recognition of sexuality from childhood'.²¹

Distinct temporalities

As shown by this brief overview, age of consent and cross-generational relations were undoubtedly part of the agenda of some homosexual groups and discussed by society more broadly. However, it would be misleading to portray gay groups as necessarily endorsing pedophilia or to pretend that the issue was not yet controversial at that time. Fierce opposition emerged very early on, but occurred to varying degrees across Europe. Today, most European gay and lesbian groups make a clear difference between homosexuality and pedophilia and do not regard the latter as belonging to their activities.²² However, this rupture did not take place everywhere at the same time. These divergent temporalities echo gay liberation itself, which did not happen everywhere, did not lead to the same results, and had a variable duration.²³

An early disjunction

Debates about pedophilia were rapidly disconnected from gay and lesbian issues in countries such as Britain, the US and Denmark. In these three cases, this was closely correlated to increased social and legal opposition and prosecution by the police and judiciary. In Britain, the

first pedophile group, the Paedophile Action for Liberation (PAL), was established during the wave of gay liberation, and rapidly merged with the Paedophile Information Exchange (PIE), which was born from the Scottish Minorities Group.²⁴ Until 1977, the PIE openly developed its activities, such as starting collaborations with organisations like the Albany Trust and the National Council for Civil Liberties. However, the PIE's strategy of coming out to the media, combined with sponsoring a tour across the United Kingdom by the Dutch senator Edward Brongersma (who was one of the main defenders of pedophilia in his own country) sparked a counter-offensive by conservative circles, press and police. As a result, five leaders of the PIE were charged with conspiracy to corrupt public morals,²⁵ its leader was condemned and the organisation was disbanded in 1984. Some initially welcoming gay and lesbian groups were consequently forced to distance themselves from the PIE.

The year 1977 was also a crucial one in the US as it was the beginning of Anita Bryant's campaign 'Save Our Children'. This campaign turned the defence of children into one of the main arguments against homosexual activism. As a result, most gay and lesbian groups dissociated themselves from pedophile activists, and the more special-interest North American Man Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) was established.²⁶

Peter Edelberg in this volume describes a similar but earlier evolution in Denmark. Police raids against men having sex with minors in the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the willingness of the police to dissociate them from 'good homosexuals', contributed to the emergence of the notion of the 'pedophile'. This was a major change in Danish homosexual culture and pedophiles were subsequently expelled from the Danish lesbian and gay federation in 1984.

A longer benevolence

Groups from Germany, the Netherlands and Southern Europe retained a liberationist rhetoric for a longer period of time and were less hostile to pedophile claims. While pedophile groups began to retreat in 1977 in Britain and the US, two campaigns on minors' sexual autonomy were launched in France the same year. Following a sentence against three men who had had sex with consenting minors, a group of intellectuals chaired by Gabriel Matzneff, Guy Hocquenghem and René Schérer started to campaign for a complete revision of criminal provisions against acts of gross public indecency. Michel Foucault also regularly endorsed pro-pedophile arguments in public debates.²⁷ Claims included

a full decriminalisation of homosexuality, the repeal of articles on indecent assault and the lowering of the age of consent. This was later followed by an open letter to the Commission de révision du Code penal. These two initiatives, which were published in leading newspapers such as *Le Monde* and *Libération*, were supported by key figures such as Aragon, Barthes, Baudry, Beauvoir, Chéreau, Deleuze, Derrida, d'Eaubonne, Lang, Kouchner, Sartre and Sollers.²⁸

At the same time, the Netherlands became one of the main headquarters of the pedophile movement.²⁹ A pedophile group led by Frits Bernard,³⁰ who was rapidly joined by Edward Brongersma, was established in the 1960s. In 1971, a workgroup on pedophilia was developed under the protection of the Nederlandse Vereniging voor Seksuele Hervorming (Dutch Organisation for Sexual Reform). Finally, due in part to significant internal changes and under a stronger influence of gay liberation, the powerful COC adopted an official stance in favour of pedophilia in 1980, rejecting a systematic association between inter-generational sex and sexual abuse.³¹

ILGA as a space of tensions

National differences became apparent through the debates which took place within the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA). ILGA was indeed accused of condoning pedophilia in 1993.³² At the time, this organisation had been granted a consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) after a long campaign. For this reason, a US magazine specialised in attacking the lesbian and gay movement, the *Lambda Report*,³³ divulged that it hosted a few pro-pedophile organisations. Due to this association, ILGA's membership was first suspended and later cancelled, thereby provoking fierce debates within the organisation. A resolution condemning pedophilia and excluding the pro-pedophile US organisation NAMBLA and the Dutch organisation Martijn was finally adopted by an overwhelming majority of member organisations and confirmed one year later. However, this decision was not unanimous and some members, sometimes of historical importance, expressed their reservations or left the organisation entirely.

One year later, in September 1994, a new scandal began. In January 1994, the US Senate had passed a motion asking the US to withhold all funding to the UN if the President could not certify to congress by the end of September 1994 that no UN agency was granting a status to an organisation promoting pedophilia. Further screening by US officials revealed that the Munich-based group Verein für sexuelle

Gleichberechtigung (VSG) had a pedophile sub-group holding meetings on its premises. ILGA's consultative status was thereby suspended and ILGA's members were screened again to decide whether to restore or definitively cancel ILGA's membership. Despite additional efforts and the suspension of VSG, ILGA did not manage to reintegrate ECOSOC until very recently.

While this scandal got a lot of coverage, pedophilia was not a new topic within ILGA. This topic had indeed been debated at almost every annual conference since its founding in 1978, and the study of these debates confirms the existence of divergent national approaches.³⁴ Scandinavian, British and US organisations were indeed much more reluctant to support pedophile groups than those from Germany, the Netherlands, France, Spain or Latin America. Furthermore, the examination of these debates reveals the decline of arguments condoning pedophilia and emphasises the key role of lesbian groups, and later gay youth organisations, in changing ILGA's position. As shown by Paternotte, we observe 'the slow decline of pro-pedophile stances from 1978, when ILGA was established, until the mid-nineties'. These arguments were related 'to wider debates on gay liberation. Indeed, defenders of pedophilia were using this rhetoric to advocate their rights while their opponents were articulating more pragmatic ways of imagining gay and lesbian struggles. Beyond the issue of intergenerational sex, these debates were also about the kind of movement activists wanted to build together'.

Can silence speak?

The rapid disappearance of controversies around pedophilia is intriguing. Indeed, gay and lesbian organisations, as well as society as a whole, transformed in just a few decades from a fierce debate to a relatively consensual disapproval. Four underlying reasons for such a drastic change are outlined in this chapter: dramatic transformations within the gay and lesbian movement, a disconnection with minors' right to sexual autonomy, the establishment of mobilisations against sexual abuse and a transformation of mentalities.

Dramatic transformations within the gay and lesbian movement

The transformations experienced by the gay and lesbian movement have undoubtedly impacted the claims which were subsequently made. As exemplified by the case of ILGA, the nature of these groups altered, and the revolutionary rhetoric, which once characterised gay liberation,

disappeared. Other ways of imagining political struggles emerged, as illustrated by the institutionalisation and the incorporation of gay and lesbian groups, and the impact of at least two internal transformations may be pointed out. Over time, we observe a gradually stronger emphasis on gay identity, which is conceived as the basis for collective action. Starting with gay liberation groups, it was considerably consolidated in the 1980s.³⁵ As a result, gay and lesbian groups focused on issues, which were seen as intrinsically homosexual, disengaging themselves from other struggles and abandoning broader coalitions with gender and sexual minorities. As argued by Joshua Gamson, the exclusion of pedophile groups is intrinsically intertwined with a tightening of movement identity, as pedophiles 'threatened the existing symbolic boundaries of the gay and lesbian collective'.³⁶

In addition, gay and lesbian groups have increasingly privileged legal and political change over contention. Such politics imply to speak, at least to some extent, the language of targeted institutions. They also urges activists to make strategic choices and to become more pragmatic.³⁷ For these reasons, pedophilia rapidly became an embarrassing issue.

A disconnection with minors' right to sexual autonomy

Young homosexuals, who had started to establish their own organisations, tried to distinguish themselves from pedophiles, thereby abandoning the idea of abolishing age of consent per se. One must bear in mind that, although significant differences remain between national regulations, age of consent had generally been equalised and lowered in most European countries, allowing young people to be sexually active at a lower age. This change has reduced the scope of what is defined as pedophilia, which became restricted to sex with younger partners.³⁸ Because of this crucial legal change, pro-pedophilia activists had a smaller base for mobilisations on age of consent.

The establishment of movements against child sexual abuse

Although not new,³⁹ sexual abuse became a major issue during the same time period and was increasingly associated with cross-generational relations. A few actors mobilised to put pedophilia on the agenda and to frame it as a form of violence.⁴⁰ Both Laurie Boussaguet⁴¹ and Nancy Whittier⁴² have emphasised the role played by some feminists in this process in Belgium, France, England and the US, and the way their struggle has contributed to another and more successful politicisation of pedophilia. Both authors have also demonstrated that this discourse

later resonated with the concerns of other actors, particularly psychologists.⁴³ This allowed new alliances and a wider access to public opinion. These mobilisations, which could rely on older feminist discourses on incest and were amplified by several international conferences on the issue, have highlighted numerous forms of (gender) violence. They have very definitely changed the way the debate was framed, and delegitimised sexual patterns that were perceived as less egalitarian. Unsurprisingly, some lesbians – who were often connected to feminist groups – were instrumental in changing attitudes within the gay and lesbian movement.

Transformation of mentalities

The influence of two broader changes must finally be mentioned. On the one hand, both childhood and adolescence are increasingly regarded as specific phases of life with their own requirements and needs, including elements of sexuality. This long-term process has accelerated in the second half of the 20th century⁴⁴ and has now spread to all domains of life and to all social classes. As emphasised by Laurie Bousquet,⁴⁵ the child became a legal and policy category during this period and has also been increasingly regarded as sexually innocent and vulnerable.⁴⁶

On the other hand, sexual ethics have profoundly changed, decreasing the moral legitimacy of unequal relationships. As highlighted by Gert Hekma's 'enigmatic transformation',⁴⁷ the Western world has evolved from an ideal of difference to an ideal of sameness between partners. For a very long time, sex – including among people of the same sex – relied on asymmetries (age, gender, class, etc.). These were often considered as necessary and constitutive of desire itself. If the sameness ideal has contributed to the acceptability of contemporary gay and lesbian struggles,⁴⁸ it has also discarded relations which do not rely on this ideal even when they are consensual.

Conclusion

Studying pedophilia implies a certain kind of archaeology. Not so much in a Foucauldian understanding, but rather in the more literal sense of exploring an extremely remote past and of patiently rebuilding a period which is too far away to be directly approached. Indeed, unlike most contemporary discourses, this chapter underlines that both minors' sexuality and cross-generational intercourses – two topics long intertwined – were on the agenda of several gay liberation groups. If they were not unanimously accepted, they were discussed, fuelling public controversies.

In the 1970s, one could have thought that, using the linear perspective through which sexual revolution is often conceived, pedophilia would follow the same trajectory as other sexual issues raised during the gay liberation period. Gayle Rubin herself wrote at the beginning of 'Thinking Sex': 'in 20 years or so, when some of the smoke has cleared, it will be much easier to show that these men have been the victims of a savage and undeserved witch-hunt'.⁴⁹ While regretting the disappearance of any space of discussion on the topic, she later adopted a more nuanced opinion and recognised she should have been more cautious at the time, emphasising that 'texts are produced in particular historical, social and cultural circumstances, and are part of discursive conglomerates that shift over time'⁵⁰ and that 'there are certainly some things [she] would have done differently, had [she] known then what [she] knows now'.

Interestingly, history has taken another course. One can easily argue that this is a result of sexual revolution itself and has further contributed to the achievement of the goals of emancipation and self-determination which were cherished by gay liberation activists. As stated in the introduction, this chapter does not want to enter this debate, but rather use the pedophile story to question the ways we think about sexual revolution. It shows that the history of sexual revolution is neither necessarily linear nor always gradual. Not all issues raised in the 1970s followed the same path and those which were regarded as more problematic were quickly set aside, often under the threat of conservative groups. It also illustrates that change happened at a different pace across Europe, often intersecting with the history of gay liberation. In short, the pedophile story invites us to see sexual revolution as a fragmented and contradictory process which contained potentially conflicting logics.

To conclude, this story reminds us that sexuality is necessarily a conflictual space in which different visions are in competition. By highlighting the political, social and cultural nature of sexuality, it emphasises the role of these struggles in shaping the forms sexuality takes at a specific time and place. It confirms the need to historicise and to sociologise reflections about sexuality.

Notes

1. Historically, the endorsement of pedophilia by homosexual movements has been mainly – but not exclusively – a male affair.
2. Age of consent and inter-generational relationships were long discussed together, see Waites, M (2005) *The Age of Consent*. Houndmills: Palgrave. As age of consent determines who is a sexual minor, the extent of what could

be considered pedophilia was broader before ages of consent were lowered. Hence, pedophilia advocates often presented their claims as a defence of minors' sexual freedom, and alliances between minors and pedophiles took place. This is reflected in the vocabulary used to describe these relationships (see Sandfort T, Brongersma E & Naerssen A van (1991) Man-Boy Relationships: Different Concepts for a Diversity of Phenomena. *Journal of Homosexuality* 20: 1–2, 5–12. In this chapter, although 'inter-generational relationships' are also mentioned, I mainly use the word 'pedophile', for it was the most common among actors under study. It must also be said that defenders of pedophilia were not necessarily pedophiles themselves, and that a wide range of positions existed among them.

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