

A Critique of the Gay Politics of Sex

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I often find myself contemplating the powers of language – the unnoticeable manner through which speech swiftly shapes our perception of reality. The 21st-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein successfully outlined this strange sentiment when saying that “*the limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*”¹ Where language cannot reach, your world cannot *exist*, for it cannot be communicated, but only experienced privately. As a kid, the language of my family’s environment did not comport a diversified enough lexicon to introduce me to many different possibilities of thinking about the world. One of those which I missed the most was the possibility of being a homosexual boy. That feeling sexual attraction towards someone of the same gender as mine could be a source of an eventual fulfillment and happiness. More than that, a future. Many years later, when exploring my sexuality, it was not the lack, but the command of words that once again limited the perception of my sexual identity. The hegemonic conception of sex I met within the gay community, rather than offering the freedom I desperately sought, largely forced a system of sexual expectations that constrained the expression of my own desire. At its core, the male gay community harbors a silent crisis centered around its system of sex relations.

The aim of this paper is to scrutinize the formulation of this system and offer a critique of how it has been imposed, rather than presented as a group of opportunities to evaluate sex between men. The treatment put forward by my writing shall make the recurrent use of some terminology borrowed from the field of semiotics – that of the *signifier*, the *signified*, and the *sign*. These three terms shall act as analytical tools to facilitate the development of my argument instead of obscuring it. The *signifier* is a linguistic unit, a spoken/written word or a sound-image; a word stripped from any definition. The *signified* represents a concept, the meaning behind the signifier, what the signifier represents (i.e. the meaning behind a word or term, such as tree or love). The relationship between the two composes a *sign*, which is the primary component of speech. The *sign* is what the layman use of the term *word* denotes – a symbol (signifier) and its definition (signified). The problem of the sexual system implemented by the gay community is twofold: On one face, there is the imposition of the system and the marginalization of those who do not conform to its rigid categories; on the other, there is the dysfunctionality of the system itself, even when removed from this prescriptive enforcement. Both demand an utterly attentive examination, and I shall first focus on the latter – the system’s internal contradictions – in order to demonstrate how they spontaneously give rise to the former issue and ultimately reinforce it.

The sexual system of the gay community is a system of signifiers describing positions in a sexual locus. The three most commonly employed in the predominant discourse of gay culture are the signifiers *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile*. I believe them to be quite advantageous in that they concede a certain plurality to sexual engagement. Contrary to the heterosexual norm, in which no alternatives to traditional sex have received popularized signifiers, those of the *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile* allow for more than a single axis of identification in sexual performance. Yet it would be very naïve to analyze these ideas at the exclusive

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,” in *Major Works: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Harper Perennial, 2009), 63.

level of the signifier, for they are exchanged in language as *signs*, and are therefore intimately connected to signifieds.

Following their use within the gay community, the signified of *top* is the sexual position of the penetrator; that of *bottom* is the sexual position of the penetrated, and that of *versatile*, the position of the one who transitions between performing as the penetrator and the penetrated. The particular roots of the signifiers of these signs (i.e. the selection of the words associated with these definitions) is very intriguing, and a simple argument could apparently resolve the mysterious origins: There is a purely spatial reality to the concepts. A *top* certainly means a body physically located above another, and a *bottom* certainly means a body physically positioned below another. The *versatile* then must imply a degree of fluidity, an interchange between the two spatial positions (being the one laid down or being the one laying the other down).

Strong suspicions remain after this effort, and an argument founded on language can easily justify the intuition that there might be more to these sexual positions than meets the eye. If we inspect how the mainstream gay community have adapted these terms in other languages, we shall find some interesting suggestions. In Portuguese, for instance, which is my native language, the top becomes the *ativo*, or the active, in literal translation; the versatile becomes the *versátil* (the versatile, so no disparities with the English signifier), and the bottom becomes the *passivo*, or the passive. The *active* and the *passive*, in a stark contrast to the spatial aspect initially proposed to account for the choice of these signifiers, reveal a dimension of power dynamics. The *active* is the single one that *acts* in the relation of two; the *passive* is the one who is acted upon with no resistance to the action – the submissive, inert body. We can here detect the first indications of a clear and conspicuous operation of control in the very constitution of these signs.

Language alone cannot suffice to convince us that this is the prevalent case in the majority of gay sex, but the fact that all of the three signs refer to *penetration* further endorses the idea of a canonical, institutionalized configuration of sexual practices within the community. Although it might initially appear as such, this homogeneity is not organic. When observing how these signs function in their practical uses, one finds that they are not valued equally. The top is the figure of desire of the bottom, and the bottom is the figure of desire and *use* of the top, while the versatile is patronized as a deviation of that logic, an individual who can eventually be accommodated as a bottom, but who cannot be a *complete* top when they are to act as one. The signs are also extended to the social sphere, crystallizing stereotypical representations: A gay man is deduced to be a bottom if their mannerisms are pronounced and a “gay accent” is salient in their speech, more feminine than the top, who is “contained” and masculine. Another appeal to install these tendencies is made to physiognomic traits: A tall gay man *must* be a top; a short gay man *must* be a bottom. A gay man with a big penis *is* a top; a gay man with a smaller penis *is* a bottom. Likewise, a muscular gay man *probably* is a top, and a gay man with larger glutes *probably* is a bottom.

The relation between the top and the bottom is in particular very vulnerable to distinct forms of abuse. Under the pressure to sexually perform as wished by the top, and hence avoid potential rejection, the bottom can radically follow a strict diet or, in extreme cases, starve themselves in order to not run the risk of introducing potential shortcomings to the sexual relation. The top, when sexually performing, might stay indifferent to the pleasure status of their partner, and frequently the penetration can be uncomfortable and painful to the penetrated one. The top is *pleased* and *satisfied*, the bottom is the one who *pleases* and

satisfies. The widespread acceptance of substance use in the gay community, such as that of poppers – a muscle relaxant often combined with sex in order to enhance or alleviate anal stimulation, the classical depiction of *chemsex* – can be seen as a direct outcome of these structural pressures, a response to the physical and psychological strain created by this systemic imbalance. Some recent trending terminology has even redefined the anus as a dysmorphic vagina, with neologisms like *bussy* (a blend of the signifiers *butt* and *pussy*) and the fantasy of *breeding* a partner by ejaculating while inside them.

Given these new considerations, the signifieds of *top* and *bottom* can no longer be understood in their original sexual connotations. The performances in question, as demonstrated by ample evidence, emerge not as fundamentally sexual, but as *gendered* ones. The obligatory conclusion from that discovery is that the signifier *top* has precisely the signified *man*, and the signifier *bottom* has precisely the signified *woman*. The performance of gender expected from gay sex, per its dominating sexual system, is the normative gender performance of the heterosexual formula.

A definition of gender as performative is essential to sustain this argument and explore the inherent defects behind the formulations of the gay sexual system. Without this concept, the great similarities between compulsory heterosexual sex and mainstream homosexual sex would still persist, but would remain elusive and unexplained. Following Judith Butler's theory as advanced in her magnum opus, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, gender is a doing, a *verb* and not a *noun*, a construct which is constantly liable to change and be transformed by the individual, although it might be retained by them throughout life and produce the illusion of being a static identity. She summarizes the idea when stating that "...because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all."² In the case of gay sex, the bottom repeatedly re-enacts the submissive, objectified acts observed in the gender performance of women in heteronormative sex, while the top repeatedly re-enacts the virile, dominative acts found in the gender performance of men under the same sexual script. This seems to be in part a consequence of what Butler has addressed as a "disciplinary production of gender," which "...effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain."³ She proceeds to argue that "The construction of coherence conceals the gender discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex."³ The interpretation which results from these two assertions when incorporated to our preceding deliberations is that the heterosexual elements underlying gender performances are controlling and centralized, obeying and dictating a binary logic which exploits the female figure while extolling the masculine. The category of heterosexual gender performances being imposed within the gay community is therefore a *patriarchal* one.

Additional evidence supporting this thesis is met when we understand that the use of these gender performances in the gay culture is paradoxical: The *feminine* is both desirable and repulsive. This allergy to the feminine is quite fascinating, for it notably highlights the internalized homophobia spread across the entire community. As mentioned before, the versatile cannot be a *true* top. The versatile is condemned as *the bottom in disguise* – they display more femininity than an idealized top would naturally do and

² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1999), 178.

³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 172–73.

therefore are flawed in their performativity of *men*. So clear is this pattern that a curious “scarcity” of tops is framed as a crisis within the gay community, as if we, gay men, were losing the monolithic pillar which the top signifies. Masculinity and femininity are so rigidly defined that even small digressions cause social anxiety. The former is offensively overvalued to the extent of a pathological mark, even though gay men are already outside the bounds of the traditional *masculine*. The gendered heterosexual expectation of homosexual sex is merely a fiction, as the idealizations it fosters are neither overabundant in the reality of the community nor coherent in their enactment.

In Andrea Dworkin’s first chapter of *Pornography*, the radical feminist discusses heterosexual sex in the raw circumstances of its patriarchal occurrence. She writes that:

The woman is acted on; the man acts and through action expresses sexual power, the power of masculinity. Fucking requires that the male act on one who has less power and this valuation is so deep, so completely implicit in the act, that the one who is fucked is stigmatized as feminine during the act even when not anatomically female.⁴

Once more we ought to acknowledge the theoretical wealth with which the analysis of gender in Butler’s work furnishes us. Dworkin’s contribution can only hold comprehensive meaning to our investigation when it is elevated to the performative conceptualization of gender. With that step completed, explicit parallels are drawn between her critique and the present one. To grasp the forces effecting the gender paradox as found in the gay sexual system, the male power shall be addressed, specifically in its execution of the quality of *virility*. Dworkin clarifies that “It is, in fact, an expression of energy, strength, ambition, and assertion. Defined by men and experienced by women as a form of male sexual power, virility is a dimension of energy and self-realization forbidden to women.”⁴ The emphasis on the *forbidden* is correct, and it implies that the femininity of gay men is only functional and adequate within restricted conditions (such as sex) and discrete quantities. If too excessive, for example, it becomes prone to corrupt the patriarchal masculinity of the top and render them deficient in their gender performance of *man*. The same wouldn’t hurt the bottom’s performativity of *woman*, but would also impair the varying performativity of the versatile.

Dworkin also inspects how pornographic production serves uniquely to implement and celebrate this male sexual power. In her own words, “the ways and means of pornography are the ways and means of male power.”⁵ Pornography is not just a type of media, but a group of mechanisms that organizes and teaches a vision of sex dominated by men. It naturalizes submission and aggression (both physical and psychological, both *micro* and *macro*, both individual and systemic) as inherent to sexuality rather than as products of a dictated gender performativity. Even in gay relationships, individuals are still signified within a patriarchal logic, in which sexuality is shaped by male dominance. If pornography, for Dworkin, is about how power structures shape sexual expression, then mainstream homosexual sex is pornographic because it does not escape these gendered conditions. In other words, the prevalent gay sexual system does not escape the latent disciplining that constructs sexuality in our contemporary society.

⁴ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (E.P. Dutton, 1989), 23.

⁵ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 24.

One cannot stress enough that the existence of a system of sex – a set of signifiers delineating possibilities in sexual performance – is not intrinsically problematic, but beneficial to promote the diverse and liberatory fabric of sex, mapping its prolific and complex manifestations. This is the case for many gay men who find identification in the concepts of top, bottom, and versatile. The difficulty, however, lies not in the mere presence of these roles, but in their institutionalization and the ideological framework that underpins them. These signs do not exist in isolation but are structured upon the same patriarchal dynamics that govern heterosexual sex, perpetuating a hierarchy and objectifying attitude that restrains desire. This is what warrants our immediate and serious critique.

Comparable to the discrimination of versatiles, the exclusion of non-penetrative sex individuals can be yet harsher and less realized within the broader community. Throughout the history of the gay culture, many signifiers have been introduced to designate gay men who disrupt the uniformity of penetrative sex by their apathy for it. Signifiers as *gouinage* and *side*, the latter more modern and fresher, have surfaced only to at a fleeting time fade away or shrivel, never fully sedimenting in the cultural dictionary of the gay canon. Their impermanence mirrors the marginalization of those who employ them – signifiers that seem to be destined to circulate in minute, niche spaces, before dissolving much like the identities they attempt to signify. The dismissal of *sides* and *gouinage* sex always comes with a character of accusatory invisibility. *Side* gay men are oftentimes emptied of any authentic sexual interest, relegated to an expression of asexuality, for they are exactly outside the dominant principles regulating gay sex. When they can find sexual engagement, they might be visualized as forever dangling on the fantasy of preliminaries to *real* sex, never quite touching it. More intriguingly, some sides may still find themselves captivated by the *fantasy* of penetration, though not for its enactment, but for its symbolic allure. The act itself might never bring them pleasure, yet the idea of it lingers in the mind with a strange and magnetic disposition. This phenomenon stands as another plain instance of how profoundly the notion of penetration permeates the sexual consciousness of gay men.

Penetration can be alienating if practiced imperiously and obsessively, rendering a desensitized perception of sex in which alternative erogenous zones or ways of sexual stimulation are of instantaneous disinterest and even a measure of aversion. This sensorial numbness is sexually debilitating, in that it suggests that the topic is not posed as one of personal preferences, but as the product of a continuous process of conditioning accomplished by exterior forces. If there is so much to masculine power in penetrative sex, then the lack of penetration must induce an adversity, a perturbation to an asymmetrical and inflated complacency, since without it, there is no obvious signifier to the exercise of power. In light of this analysis, *gouinage* sex and *sides* are capable of undermining the patriarchal masculinity of the sexual system. One does not come as surprised when this realization is aligned with the resultant observation that these individuals are covertly oppressed within the gay community. Another complication arising from the centralization of penetrative sex, possibly more infrequent, is the taut *resistance* to approach sex which does not involve penetration. Resistance is suitably distinct from unenthusiasm or abhorrence of non-penetrative sex, for, in this context, desire and interest on it are rather abundantly available, despite being forcefully repressed by the apprehension of non-penetrative sex as a cultural taboo. It simply is not *true sex* and should hence be practiced only occasionally and rather secretly.

Beyond *gouinage* relations and *sides*, there are also gay men who do not identify with any of the signs thus far explored in this text. They find themselves in a spectrum of their sexual performances and cannot particularly attach their experiences to a signifier of a sort, either because of deliberate refusal, or because no signifier has been efficiently synthesized and absorbed by the community. One must remember that the variability of sexual expression also presents itself as an obstacle to the acquisition of specific signifiers. This *gray area* of gay sex is much of what the other gray areas of the LGBTQIAPN+ community inscribe on the queer existence: Spaces of constant transition, close to the fine lines defining known boundaries or removed from the sight of the signs which a majority identify themselves with.

The problem of descriptions is one expeditious corollary arising from the general perspective of this group. Much like the broader imperative faced by homosexual individuals to “come out” within a heteronormative society, gay men whose sexual interests fall into less conventional or liminal performances of sexuality may experience an analogous pressure, a miniaturized facsimile of the same ritual, within their *own* community. Often, they feel compelled to disclose their divergence from the dominant sexual scripts to prospective romantic or sexual partners as a form of preemptive self-protection, hoping to avert rejection that might arise from their deviation from normative practices. Arranged under the widely circulated ideal of “compatibility”, this *pressure to disclose* becomes imbued with the attributes of a coercive expectation, one masked as practicality but founded in the inflexible architecture of the dominant sexual view. Compatibility means the alignment of the signs top, bottom, and versatile, assessed through a logic of sexual pairing. Two bottom men, for instance, may be deemed *incompatible*, whereas a versatile and a bottom are more likely to be a viable match (i.e. *compatible*). With the adoption of this *inference by compatibility*, these signs become the primary coordinates through which desirability is delineated and intimacy is negotiated, reinforcing the reductionism of the gay system of sex and its relational dynamics. The absurdity of this reasoning turns evident when we realize that these signs are explicitly treated as categorical truths instead of fluid, subjective preferences. A fluctuation from these terms becomes not merely a personal nuance of sex, but a potential rupture with the normalized sphere, casting those who do not conform as *incompatible* by default.

There is no easy resolution to this whole state of affairs. The difficulties that have been stated and explored are all pertinent and not trivial; the devices of rejection are a many, and the vulnerability of a community that has already been robbed from much of its rights remains severely inflamed. My work has attempted to argue that we have the proper reasons to advocate for a revision of this sexual system. It is not of my present knowledge how these cultural images of sex will be substituted or amended, but they certainly ought to prioritize inclusion and surpass this currently hateful structure which marginalizes identities and fails even on its own terms. Perhaps the use of broader signifiers, such as terms denoting fields of sexual performance instead of positions (e.g. the *gray area*), will prove to be moderately successful for the beginning of a popular reform. Yet I believe that we have the spirit to be optimistic, and for now shall not utter more than my hope for a gradual progress in the ways we choose to represent the diversity we hold and embody.

It was never the ambition of this text to exhaust the subject it set out to examine or offer answers to its delicate intricacies. Rather, my writing was entirely conceived as an opening gesture – an exposition of a complex and layered issue within the male gay community, aimed at illuminating the limitations of

its prevailing perspectives on sex and the impacts they have on the welfare of many homosexual individuals. In remaining faithful to this intention, I have purposefully refrained from delving into adjacent but no less important concerns, such as the facts of gay loneliness, hookup culture, body and beauty standards, transgender gay men, and the transparent hypersexualization of gay men *by* gay men. Each of these domains bears profound intersections with the arguments here explored and, if treated with the same critical attention, could undoubtedly enrich the inquiry beyond the scope I have drawn.

Words can be both liberating and enslaving. They can be necessary to unveil the unseen and bestow speech to the speechless, as they can also confine discourse to that which it signifies, to that which is tangible and already in the realm of language. A gay man first acquainting themselves with the gay community rapidly learns about its constitutive sexual codes – a system of signs and rules that appear definitive, almost natural and anachronic. They are met in every venue of the culture, and they are known by all. Desire is preordained, or it is made to fit. And yet, any discomfort the gay man may feel, subtle and dissonant, unplaceable and incongruous, takes time to surface, longer still to be named. That name, when at last obtained, may sound foreign, estranged from the very language he was first given to understand himself. My personal impression has always been one that can only inspire me to question: When did we allow so many of us to feel like strangers among strangers?

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