David M. Halperin: *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*. (Chicago/ London: Chicago University Press, 2002)

By Isabel Karremann, University of Erlangen, Germany

1 Halperin diagnoses a peculiar kind of academic "amnesia" (2) when it comes to the history of (homo)sexuality, both in regard to the familiarization of the historical alterity of its object (the sexuality of ancient Greece, for example) and in regard to its methodology (the ways in which we historicize sexuality). He claims that the categories and terminology of our own contemporary discourses on sexuality render the specific alterity of other historical cultures' organizations of sex and gender opaque: "All our research into otherness, into cultural alterity, presents to us an endlessly perplexing spectacle of the exotic, which merely reinforces our attachment to our own categories of thought and experience" (3). Moreover, the constructivist approaches developed out of a need to redress these shortcomings have come to obstruct our vision in their turn. The broad reception of critics such as Michel Foucault, Halperin argues, has led to a conventionalization of his highly original writings to such a degree that they are reduced to a set of almost clichéd concepts. The fault obviously does not lie with Foucault - indeed, Halperin's essays are based on very careful (re)readings of his texts - but rather with the academic commodification of his ideas: The "almost ritualistic invocation of [Foucault's] name" has reduced "the operative range of his thought to a small set of received ideas, slogans, and bits of jargon that have now become so commonplace and so familiar as to make more direct engagement with Foucault's texts entirely indispensable" (25). As a result, Halperin claims, we are nearer to "Forgetting Foucault" (the title of ch. 1) than we might think. This paradox of forgetting the all-too-familiar, and of familiarizing otherness to the point of erasing its specific alterity, constitutes the double focal point of the essays collected in this volume, a paradox which significantly informs the practices and politics of writing the history of (homo)sexuality.

2 The introduction to the volume serves as a response to various criticisms of Halperin's seminal publication *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (1989). In dialogue with his critics as well as more recent work on the history of sexuality, Halperin develops his highly sophisticated - and at the same time convincingly simple - methodology of "How to do the History of Homosexuality." Rather than contributing to a history of homosexuality as such, the four essays engage with what Halperin calls "historiographical" issues of evidence, identification and politics of writing the history of homosexuality. Taken together, they constitute a meta-discussion of methodology, or, as Halperin himself puts it, of "the

interpretive quandaries and intellectual pleasures of doing the history of homosexuality" (2). Instead of discussing each essay individually, therefore, I will address the main methodological concepts that underlie Halperin's detailed and fascinating readings of ancient sexualities.

3 In the first essay, as indeed throughout the volume, Halperin challenges the by now firmly established division between pre-modern sexual acts and modern sexual identities as one of the most glaring and conventionalized mis-readings of Foucault. By placing the relevant passage from *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, in the context of the overall argumentative move of the book, he shows that the usual readings of this passage are inattentive to Foucault's text and result in a rigid discursive and temporal differentiation beween sexual act and sexual identity that forecloses any inquiry into genuine pre-modern conceptualizations (29-32). Here, as in the other three essays, he challenges the "current doctrine that sexual acts were unconnected to sexual identities in European discourses before the nineteenth century" by showing the complex intersections of sexual acts, sexual desire and sexual identity in several instances ranging from ancient Greece to early modern England.

4 While Halperin does not wish to demolish the "absolutely indispensable distinction between sexual acts and sexual identities," he challenges the temporal and discursive gap academic discourse has established between *pre-modern sexual acts* and *modern sexual identities*. As his illustrations show, sexual acts could be interpreted as representative of an individual's sexual morphology (you look like it, you behave like it, but it does not encompass your entire subjectivity), as well as expressive of individuals sexual subjectivity (you do not look like it, but the hidden deviant preference informs your subjectivity). His perceptive reading of the ancient Greek Erôtes, a dialogue about the relative merits of homosexuality and heterosexuality, complicates our modern, simplistic identification of sexual object choice and sexual orientation further. This is a list of considerations derived from the text, a list whose unfamiliar juxtaposition of categories clearly upsets our own categories of sexual identity, due to "(1) the text's emphasis on paederasty to the exclusion of homosexuality [...]; (2) the masculinization of the paederast and the effeminization of the lover of women; (3) the paederast's lack of social marginalization; (4) the shared queerness of both interlocutors; (5) the ability of each interlocutor to put himself in the erotic subject position of the other; (6) their common knowingness about both women and boys; (7) the paederast's capacity to eroticize elements of human anatomy independently of the sex of the person whose anatomy is being eroticized; (8) the lover of women's utilitarian appeal to quantitative factors as a basis for calculating relative sexual value [a woman's body provides more orifices for the man's

penetrative pleasures]; (9) both men's treatment of sexual object-choice as a matter of taste." (99). This list seems reminiscent (to the reviewer at least) of Borges' quote from a certain Chinese encyclopedia cited at the very beginning of Foucault's *The Order of Things*...

5 Scholars, then, should be wary of bringing the concepts of their own contemporary discourses of sexuality to bear on historical texts, since this practice tends to efface the alterity of these texts and with it the chance to identify the specific discourse on sexuality of that time: "Those historians of sexuality who redescribe in modern conceptual terms the culturally specific phenomena they observe in the distant historical record behave, in effect, like tourists in the archives: they misrecognize the sexual features of the period they study as exotic versions of the already familiar" (60). A typical analytical move, Halperin proceeds, would be to take one highly particularized instance and to generalize it to such an extent that it functions as a placekeeper for the concept as a whole (for example, a stigmatized instance of same-sex encounter such as anal intercourse comes to stand for homosexuality as such, that is, for homosexuality as stigmatizing, aberrant practice per se). The ludicrous effects of such totalizing statements become immediately apparent when the rhetorical strategy is turned on its head and "homosexuality" is replaced with "heterosexuality." This has been brilliantly undertaken by Mario DiGangi (*Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama*, 1997), whose parody of the totalization of heterosexuality employs the diction and concepts of much current work on same-sex erotic practices and identities: "In early modern England, heterosexuality was considered a shameful and dangerous practice; it was therefore socially and legally proscribed. Laws and local customs punished those people who engaged in premarital sex, had illegitimate children, or committed adultery. In sonnett sequences and tragedies, heterosexual relations are often represented as anguished, violent, or politically disastrous affairs..." (see also 62). Instead, Halperin concludes, we should carefully recover the terms in which erotic experiences of individuals belonging to the past were actually constituted and reflect on the difference between those terms and the ones we currently employ. Our own methods do not provide us with objectivity; rather, we must realize the extent to which we bring our own situated knowledge to bear on our interpretations of historical documents.

6 It is therefore essential to develop ways of thinking about same-sex sexual encounters that do not automatically correlate them with "homosexuality." Our modern notion of homosexuality, as Eve Sedgwick Kosofsky has already diagnosed in her 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*, is far from unified; rather, "the definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality is a sign of its historical evolution: it results from the way 'homosexuality' has effectively incorporated - without homogenizing - earlier models of same-

sex sexual relations and of sex and gender deviance" (12). In his last essay, aptly (yet not dogmatically) entitled "How to do the History of Homosexuality," Halperin explores these earlier models as well as their differences and overlaps in an attempt to provide Sedgwick's claim with a historical grounding. He offers "a new strategy for approaching the history of homosexuality," one that is committed to the constructivist approach of New Historicism while acknowledging the existence of transhistorical continuities and integrating them into a genealogic account of the emergence of (homo)sexuality.

7 Halperin identifies four pre-modern discourses of same-sex erotic relations: effeminacy, paederasty or "active" sodomy, friendship or male love, and passivity or inversion. The modern concept of homosexuality constitutes a fifth category, one in which each of the other four lives on and accounts for its incoherence. Each of these categories conceptualizes same-sex encounters differently and exists independently from the others, yet also shapes the others through its exclusions. In a very careful analysis, Halperin demonstrates where exactly these discourses differ and where they overlap.

8 Effeminacy, for example, constitutes a violation of gender norms and has functioned traditionally as a marker of *hetero*sexual excess in men, while paederasty or "active" sodomy refers to male sexual penetrations of another male subordinate in terms of age, social class, gender style and/ or sexual role. Both this and the category of friendship or male love, are in keeping with normative gender roles; if anything, they lead to a heightened status of hyper-virility. Neither does sodomy, even if there is a conscious preference of same-sex penetration, affect the sodomist's sexual identity as such; here the notion of sexual act performed on a youth or social inferior is appropriate. Similarly, the same-sex sexual object choice does not necessarily function as a marker of difference, nor is it visibly inscribed on the sodomist's face and body (in contrast to the spectacularly visible otherness of the invert). Male friendship can exist only between equals - hierarchy brings with it the odour of sodomy. The disinterested love between two men, often envisaged as a merging of individual identities and hence as an unwillingness to live without the other, is all about sameness, and in this insistence on equality in all respects, it seems to distance itself self-consciously from the world of (sodomitical) sexual penetration. The fourth category, "inversion," marks a transgression from gender norms, indeed a reversal of masculine gender identity. While it involves sexual penetration by another man, this is less significant for the classification than the spectacularly deviant gender identity; the "womanly" liking for a "passive" role in sexual intercourse with other men is only one aspect of it. While effeminacy is an option potentially *all* men are held likely to succumb to (which makes this category correspond to what

Sedgwick has called a "universalizing" notion of gender deviance), inversion clearly is perceived as a constitutional defect only a few men suffer from: they have been unable to withstand the allure of pleasure and have betrayed their masculine gender ("minoritizing" view). Accordingly the "passive," is seen as spectacularly different: his deviant gender identity affects his personal demeanor, his attitudes, gestures and manners of demeaning himself - "Inversion manifests itself outwardly" (124). It is this category which comes closest to what in modern discourse will be called a sexual orientation or identity.

9 Homosexuality, a term first coined in 1869 in Germany, differs from these concepts in that it combines three previously uncorrelated concepts: an orientation perceived as perverted (like the passive/invert); a notion of same-sexual object choice (as in sodomy and inversion); a sexually deviant behaviour (like inversion and effeminacy). "Homosexuality" in the modern sense is "at once a psychological condition, an erotic desire, and a sexual practice" (131). What distinguishes homosexuality most from pre-modern categories of same-sex relations is that *homosexual object-choice in and of itself* functions as a marker of sexual and social difference. Furthermore, unlike the pre-modern discourses (apart from friendship) which refer to only *one* of the sexual partners, it "applies to both partners alike, whether active or passive, whether gendered normatively or deviantly. The hallmark of 'homosexuality', in fact, is the refusal to distinguish between same-sex sexual partners or to rank them by treating one of them as more (or less) homosexual than the other." (132)

10 While some features of the pre-modern discourses on same-sex relations survive in the modern notion, homosexuality as a concept rearranges and reinterprets the earlier patterns of erotic organization in significant ways. Now sexual object-choice becomes detached from any consideration of gender - the term is applicable to both men and women, independently of their orderly or disorderly gender behaviour. The former hierarchy of sexual roles loses its significance for classification and gives way to the sameness or difference of the sexual partners: no matter who does what to whom, both partners are assumed to participate in and be responsible for the sexual encounter alike. Finally, homosexuality is now set against heterosexuality, both defined by sexual object-choice and constituting seemingly mutually exclusive forms of human subjectivity and sexuality (133/34).

11 To conclude, Halperin's *How to do the History of Homosexuality* is a very instructive and useful book for all wishing to study the history of sexuality. All of the essays in this collection have been published previously (ch. 3 as early as 1992 and the first three chapters now for the third time), and the title of Halperin's keynote lecture at the *Sexuality After Foucault* conference in Manchester last November was the same as that of ch. 1, "Forgetting

Foucault." Yet in spite of this slight hint of "academic recycling," Halperlin's book is indeed a very welcome contribution to the methodology of (not only) sexual historiography. Apart from its methodological merits, what makes this collection eminently readable are the fascinating accounts of ancient and early modern concepts of sexuality. Unfortunately, many scholars and historians of sexuality take Foucault's dictum of the emergence of the homosexual as a type in the 19th century too literally: they assume that not much of interest in same-sexual matters can have happened before and restrict their investigations to this relatively short period. Halperin shows us that pre-modern discourses of (homo)sexuality from ancient Greece to early modern Europe are not only instructive and interesting in themselves, but can contribute significantly to a better understanding of the modern concept of homosexuality and, indeed, of contemporary critical discourses on the history of sexuality as well.