

## LIVING A PARADIGM SHIFT

*the end of the homosexual?* by dennis altman

**T**HE END OF THE HOMOSEXUAL? is a long-awaited addition to the substantial body of work by Australia's widely published and acclaimed activist and political scientist Dennis Altman. It is a sequel to his first book, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1972; revised 1973), a political treatise that was published first in USA in 1971 and then in Australia in 1972. That book immediately achieved iconic status, and was memorably celebrated in 2012 by an international conference at which academics and activists of diverse origins and generations debated the achievements and legacies of four decades of Gay Liberation.

As with *Homosexual*, Altman once more entertains and informs the reader with his encyclopaedic knowledge of publications and theory. *Homosexual* drew upon popular literature, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Marcuse's interpretation of Marxism, and Alfred Kinsey. This new book continues to refer to Freud, but also makes extensive use of the substantial body of social and political science research on sexuality and gender that has emerged over the past forty years. HIV/AIDS created an imperative in the 1980s for frank consideration of notions surrounding masculinity, perhaps most obviously reflected in the literature by the term "men who have sex with men," or MSMs. It also prompted new discussions about sex work. These practical exigencies coincided with the emergence of identity politics and deconstructionism. Importantly, new analytical tools not in use when *Homosexual* was released have now entered public discourse, with critical constructs such as homophobia, queer and heteronormativity becoming commonplace.

While *Homosexual* was a political clarion call, *The End of the Homosexual?* is a memoir. It is characterised by regular comparison and contrast of developments in Australia and the USA, where Altman has lived for various periods of his life. The role of government in responding to and managing issues arising from HIV/AIDS is the most obvious point of contrast. Another is found in Altman's thoughts about the continuing "cultural cringe" in

which Australians have looked to American rather than Australian writers for inspiration (80). He is perhaps uniquely placed to write such a memoir: he notes in this new book that it was a "historical accident" that allowed him to combine activism and an academic career (121). Accidental or otherwise, he has had the fortunate if improbable knack of being either present or involved in key international events throughout his life. He brings to this new work an extensive knowledge accrued through professional interest and personal engagement that few others, if any, can match.

*Homosexual* opens with the declaration: "To be a homosexual in our society is to be constantly aware that one bears stigma". Altman then conceived of oppression in terms of "persecution" and "discrimination". In his thesis about identity – "everyone is gay, everyone is straight" – he argued that the religious, medical and legal oppression of the homosexual should be replaced with at least tolerance and preferably acceptance. Utopia would be a world having greater acceptance of human sexuality with "both a decrease in the stigma attached to unorthodox sex and a corresponding increase in overt bisexuality" (1973, 46-55, 237-8).

Altman acknowledges in *The End of the Homosexual?* that the first Gay Liberationists were mainly leftist, white and male, although they regarded themselves as part of the wider liberation movements concerned with race and gender. Gay Lib involved, he records, "a tiny number of homosexuals in cities across the western world, with occasional outriders beyond, as in Mexico and Argentina". Even so, the impact of Gay Lib has exceeded its origins and, he adds, despite all the changes that have occurred, "we are still in a world that is marked by paradigm shifts that began forty years ago" (70). This book offers personal recollections of some of those shifts.

"In some ways, the central question" of *The End of the Homosexual?*, explains Altman, "is whether the glass is half-full or half-empty" (153). In answering this question, he divides the book into three sections. The first section succinctly recounts the challenges to homosexual life before the 1970s, and examines why Gay Liberation has been so important. Altman contends that the continuing significance of Gay Lib is found in the ideas and unresolved questions it raised: gender relations, assimilation or difference, and whether gay life allowed for different forms of relationships and sexual freedoms beyond the presumed heterosexual norm.

The book's second part traces the impact of Gay Lib during the remainder of the twentieth century, and explores the key issues and themes of those three decades. The triumphs of the period were marred by poor relations between men and women in the movement, and by HIV/AIDS – notwithstanding that the latter provided opportunities for women and men to collaborate in addressing the demands imposed on the community by AIDS, and also created new career paths for many. "Queer" developed in the 1990s as a theory, as a movement and, for some, as an identity. Moreover, the phenomenon of "Global Gay" emerged as

information, ideas and people moved more freely around the world. Altman explains how a “combination of global images, a new interest in human rights and the AIDS epidemic have come together to stimulate a rapid growth of gay and lesbian groups across most parts of the world over the past three decades, often bringing long-established communities with traditional understandings of sexuality and gender into contact with imported concepts of gayness” (138).

In the book’s final section, Altman considers the current issues during these first years of the present century: queer people are increasingly breaking through the glass ceiling despite inequalities across the globe, and debates over homophobia, heteronormativity and marriage equality are widespread. The oppression and stigma in the medical, legal and religious spheres that Altman described in *Homosexual* continues in many countries or has even worsened. In contrast, and despite enduring religious intolerance, these have significantly dissipated in most western countries and parts of South America and Asia. Yet the need for the homosexual, gay and queer identity persists: “In everyday life, the reality that being homosexual still sets one apart to some extent from the mainstream reveals itself in two major ways: the continuing trope of ‘coming out’ and the need for separate queer spaces, where homosexuality is the norm” (166).

*The End of the Homosexual?* is promoted as “part memoir/part politics”. It is accurate to describe the book as a political memoir and, as such, it is engaging and informative although there are themes that could be discussed in greater detail. In the chapter entitled “Where were the women?” Altman seems reticent to expand his experiences of and opinions on gender politics. There is a sense, too, that more anecdotes arising from his international work on HIV in many of Australia’s neighbouring countries as well as his continuing connections with Europe and the Americas could have generated further insights. The book is dedicated to Anthony Smith, Altman’s partner who died last year aged just 53 and who has been referred to elsewhere as Australia’s Kinsey. It is likely that their complementary and overlapping professional interests have influenced Altman over the past two decades, but there is little in the book that would suggest this.

Had this book been a political history rather than memoir, then a concentrated analysis of the generational activist shifts that have occurred could’ve been expected. The demands of a maturing political movement have changed as the calls for the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between men broadened out to include lobbying for the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation covering diverse sexual orientation, and then later expanded with demands for equality in the treatment of people regardless of sexuality or gender. Additionally, these shifts have been taking place globally, and there is a fuller discussion to be had about Australia’s (and Altman’s) role and contributions in our region through the projects funded under international aid programs.

In recent years, Altman has been discussing his opinions about same-sex marriage: he is

not an ideological advocate although he concedes the point over the principle of equality. In the book, he treats the concept of marriage as if it is immutable and omits description of how social movements have changed understandings of marriage. Women no longer routinely promise to love, honour and obey their husbands in a union that is for life. While people instead often pledge to respect and care for each other, expectations of serial marriages and of sex outside of marriage (emotional rather than sexual fidelity, as Altman puts it) are growing. The efforts of queer people have contributed to these changes, even if influence is a two-way street. What is missing from the book is Altman’s passionate rejection of same-sex marriage as a human right. He has spoken about inappropriate normative pressures placed on single people, and decried the priority given by human rights activists to marriage over other pressing domestic and international issues such as religious fundamentalism. Such elements of his vision for the liberation movement deserve greater emphasis.

The central thesis about the end of the homosexual identity is summarised in a coda that functions as the book’s conclusion. Gay Lib, asserts Altman, “has been one of the most successful of the cultural movements of the 1970s, both in achieving major changes in cultural mores and in its ability to continue to mobilise support, even if today’s demand for same-sex marriage seems rather distant from the radicalism of early gay liberation”. Just as contemporary identity constructs and issues would have seemed unimaginable forty years ago, he writes, the imagining of people’s lives forty years hence is similarly difficult. But today, “younger queers are more self-confident, more comfortable with their sexuality, and therefore more able to move easily between the queer and straight worlds” (202). Altman declares that “if this leads to a proliferation of different ways of being gay, that would seem to me a major achievement” (208). Such achievement is due in no small part to the contributions Altman himself has made. While in his memoir he is modest about this, the book nonetheless is an invaluable and welcome addition to our appreciation of Gay Liberation and its legacy.

#### Bibliography

Altman, Dennis. 1973. *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*. Revised edition. Sydney: Penguin.

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#### Biography

Dino Hodge’s political biography, *Don Dunstan, Intimacy and Liberty* will be released in 2014. His previous oral history books include *Did you meet any malagas?* on Darwin’s multi-racial gay community, and *The Fall Upward* on spirituality in the lives of Australian lesbian women and gay men. He has a PhD in history from the University of Melbourne.