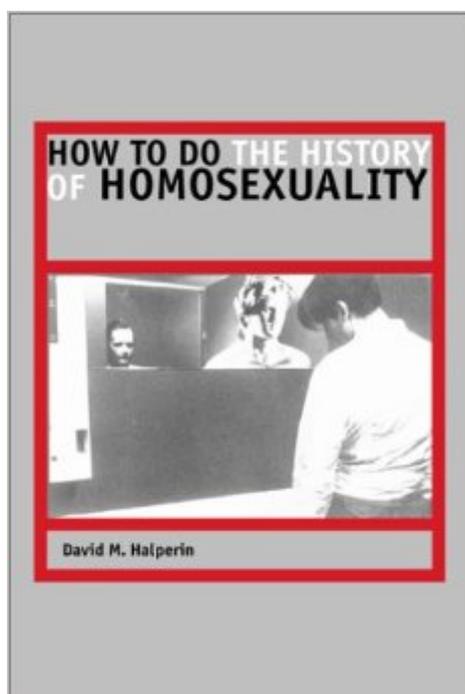


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How To Do The History Of Homosexuality



Synopsis

In this long-awaited book, David M. Halperin revisits and refines the argument he put forward in his classic *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*: that hetero- and homosexuality are not biologically constituted but are, instead, historically and culturally produced. *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* expands on this view, updates it, answers its critics, and makes greater allowance for continuities in the history of sexuality. Above all, Halperin offers a vigorous defense of the historicist approach to the construction of sexuality, an approach that sets a premium on the description of other societies in all their irreducible specificity and does not force them to fit our own conceptions of what sexuality is or ought to be. Dealing both with male homosexuality and with lesbianism, this study imparts to the history of sexuality a renewed sense of adventure and daring. It recovers the radical design of Michel Foucault's epochal work, salvaging Foucault's insights from common misapprehensions and making them newly available to historians, so that they can once again provide a powerful impetus for innovation in the field. Far from having exhausted Foucault's revolutionary ideas, Halperin maintains that we have yet to come to terms with their startling implications. Exploring the broader significance of historicizing desire, Halperin questions the tendency among scholars to reduce the history of sexuality to a mere history of sexual classifications instead of a history of human subjectivity itself. Finally, in a theoretical tour de force, Halperin offers an altogether new strategy for approaching the history of homosexuality—a one that can accommodate both ruptures and continuities, both identity and difference in sexual experiences across time and space. Impassioned but judicious, controversial but deeply informed, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality* is a book rich in suggestive propositions as well as eye-opening details. It will prove to be essential reading for anyone interested in the history of sexuality.

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Customer Reviews

...Next to the devastatingly landmark work of George Chauncey at the University of Chicago and the recently race-conscious examinations of John D'Emilio at the University of IL at Chicago, Professor Halperin's books--and this sometimes incisively polemical yet well-substantiated new methodological contribution--stand as the most rigorous historical inquiries into the history of gay male sexuality today. The previous negative review shows just how contentious the notion of "doing" "homosexual" history is. However, Halperin's innovations and arguments demand attention: he argues for archival excavations of sexualities (plural) and he does not take for granted the fact that one vision of "homosexuals" was the same in all world contexts. Today, current and future generations would do well to fuse historical and anthropological methods--or a greater attention to cultural development and entanglements both synchronically and diachronically--than only to focus upon history in terms of monological, cause-effect-bound arguments. But Halperin's approach, essentially, works toward this interdisciplinarity. Without a doubt, this book is excellent.

There seems to be some confusion regarding who David Halperin is and what he has written. Indeed, some seem unaware that he has written other books, at all. Halperin's Ph.D. is in Classics, as in all things ancient Greek and Roman, not English or Queer Theory. He has been a Classics professor in a Department of Classics. I once had a Classics professor who had been his advisee as either an undergraduate or graduate student, I don't recall which. He gravitated to Queer Theory only sometime thereafter. He has written a book largely about the history of male-male sex in antiquity, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality and Other Essays in Greek Love*, which is both well-known and standard reading in the field, in which he largely follows Kenneth Dover. As far as I know, and I am surmising from what I have read, he now teaches in an English department only because: (a) he has become somewhat disenchanted with sexual-identity politics in Classics departments, (b) he is now much more interested in Queer Theory, though he continues to address antiquity in the occasionally published essay, some of which have also become standard in the field, (c) many Queer Theorists have gravitated to English departments, and, (d) as a Classics Ph.D., he is well qualified to teach ancient literature. Though I choose not to adopt Halperin's suggestions in this book in their entirety, I do see a very great deal worth either adopting or

rigorously considering in this book. I particularly enjoy his treatment of the controversies and shady dealings surrounding Bernadette Brooten and Amy Richlin.

Halperin in this new book has adopted Eva Sedjweck's criticism of his early work, "One Hundred Years of Homosexuality." Halperin has now abandoned his prior simplification of constructionism. Halperin's main aim in this work is to give a historical grounding to the insight of Sedjweck's "Epistemology of the Closet." It aims at providing a schema that explains the relation between the category of our modern homosexuality and those of the ancient world. For Halperin, there are four ancient categories: effeminacy, sodomy, freindship, and inversion. By focusing attention on these categories, Halperin shows the irreducibility of each one to the other by arguing that a term like homosexuality is not capable of explaining every instance of male-to-male encounters and that a transhistorical notion of homosexuality will ultimately fail to account for the varied expressions of same-sex acts before our era. Forget the negative reviews, this is a superb work of both ingenuity and keenness.

This book developed, no doubt, out of the controversial course Professor Halperin offered not so very long ago entitled "How to Be Gay" as a graduate English seminar. As one might expect, the course trafficked in self-indulgent stereotypes and wallowed in its "campiness" at the precise time that it was supposed to be challenging the idea of rigid, fixed sexual identities. This book does the same thing, while also participating in the trendy and almost deafening "call to historicize" always and at all costs in our analyses of *any* cultural artifact or phenomenon. The reasons for these calls are theoretically to encourage a sensitivity to the particularity and specificity of individual/local experience. In practice, such calls are unthinking, unreflective echoing of an academic trend that unfairly dismisses the contributions that fields such as psychology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, linguistics, etc. can make to the study of art, literature, sexuality, gender, subjectivity, and politics. If Halperin had wanted to do a history of homosexuality (or of "A" homosexuality), he should have just done so and not gone on and on quoting theorists such as Foucault and telling us we must historicize simply because Foucault says we should and everyone is doing it. There have already been more than enough "calls" for such histories.

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