



Altman, Dennis (b. 1943)

by Nikolai Endres

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For more than thirty years, Dennis Altman, a self-described "international activist-academic," has written on such topics as the United States and its politics, the gay movement, postage stamps, AIDS, the modernization of Asia, and national identity. He specializes in theories and practices of sexuality, in particular the development of the gay and lesbian movement and the globalization of sexual identities. He is also interested in the social, political, and cultural impact of the AIDS epidemic.

Gore Vidal pays tribute to Altman in the preface to a 1995 edition of *The City and the Pillar* (originally published in 1948), where he recounts how the book was taken from Altman at the Sydney airport in 1969: "Altman challenged the obscenity law under which the book had been seized. The judge in the case acknowledged that under the law that he must administer the book was obscene, but then, in a famous obiter dicta, he wrote that he thought the law absurd: in due course, it was changed." (Vidal is right about Altman, but the book in question was actually *Myra Breckinridge*.)

Moreover, in a series of footnotes in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1983), Argentinian writer Manuel Puig cites Altman's most important work, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, as one of the first books to chronicle the gay and lesbian liberation movement. In addition, Jeffrey Weeks, a respected scholar of sexuality studies, praises Altman in his *Making Sexual History* (2000) for "anticipating" rather than simply recording change.

Altman is an elected member of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. In its July 4, 2006 issue, *The Bulletin*, Australia's oldest weekly magazine of opinion and politics, listed him as one of the 100 most influential Australians ever.

Altman lives in Melbourne with Anthony Smith, his partner since 1990.

Education

Dennis Altman was born in Sydney, Australia on August 16, 1943, to a Russian mother and Austrian father. He was educated at the Friends' School, Hobart, and received his B. A. from the University of Tasmania in 1964. Assisted by a Fulbright scholarship, he earned his M. A. in Government at Cornell University in 1966, where he discussed the Vietnam war with Hannah Arendt. (Despite his success as an academic, Altman never completed a doctorate.)

Although he came across Marx and Freud as an undergraduate, Altman did not read them in detail until after graduate school, when he also discovered their followers Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse. These seminal thinkers were to influence his subsequent work, as did the writings of gay novelists Christopher Isherwood, James Baldwin, and Gore Vidal, whom he also discovered while in graduate school.

Although he returned to Australia in 1967, in the crucial year 1970 Altman was living in San Francisco and in New York, cities that may both claim to be ground zero of the early gay liberation movement, in which he

quickly became a participant.

Academic Employment

Altman has held positions at Monash University in Melbourne, Sydney University, and La Trobe University in Bundoora, where he is currently Professor of Politics. Over the years, he has chaired various academic units, including the Department of Politics, the School of Sociology, Politics & Anthropology, and the School of Social Sciences.

He also held visiting appointments at the Institut des Hautes Etudes in Paris, New York University, University of California at Santa Cruz and at San Francisco, University of Utrecht in the Netherlands, McGill University in Montreal, University of Chicago, University of Natal in South Africa, and Harvard University.

Major Publications and Professional Engagement

Altman's most important publications include *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), *Coming Out in the Seventies* (1979), *The Homosexualization of America*, *The Americanization of the Homosexual* (1982), *AIDS in the Mind of America: The Social, Political, and Psychological Impact of a New Epidemic* (1986), *Global Sex* (2001), *Gore Vidal's America* (2005), and *51st State?* (2006). He is also the author of a novel, *The Comfort of Men* (1993), and a memoir, *Defying Gravity: A Political Life* (1997).

Altman's principal claim to fame rests on *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, which grew out of the intersection of his involvement in the early gay rights movement and his academic background.

A pioneering work, *Homosexual* was enormously influential for several reasons, but especially because of its wide range and optimistic outlook. Altman was one of the first critics to pull a lot of disparate ideas about sexual identity and liberation into a coherent argument. The book captured the spirit of the early gay liberation movement following the Stonewall riots of 1969, which Altman termed the gay world's "Boston Tea Party."

Many gay men and lesbians of a certain age still remember how liberating they found the book and its polemical tone, as in its opening claim: "For too long homosexuals have allowed themselves to be defined by a heterosexual world which at worst persecutes and at best tolerates them." Gay liberation, Altman announced, lies in an "assertion of gayness," namely the refusal to feel guilt or shame at being homosexual.

Political and Civic Involvement

Politically a "Libertarian Socialist," Altman employs Marxist models to discuss sexual politics. Perhaps not surprisingly, he dismisses the distinction between academics and activism, consistently combining academic analysis with gay activism. He has served as a spokesman for Australia's glbtq movement and has taken part in numerous marches, demonstrations, and other political activities. Rather than use the detached tone prevalent in scholarship, Altman prefers the first-person voice in his own writing.

Altman has worked as a consultant for the Western Pacific Regional Office of the World Health Organization. In 1991, he became a member of the founding executive of the AIDS Society for Asia and the Pacific and was its president from 2001 to 2005. He also joined the Global AIDS Policy Coalition (founded by Dr. Jonathan Mann, the original head of the Global Program on AIDS) centered at Harvard University, a group of eighteen scholars and activists from around the world "committed to tracking the evolving HIV/AIDS pandemic, critically analyzing the global response, and encouraging policy analysis and advocacy activities."

Repression and Recognition

Altman is most fundamentally concerned with repression, especially in contemporary liberal societies. In *AIDS in the Mind of America* (published outside the U.S. as *AIDS and the New Puritanism*), for example, he investigates the gay community's response to AIDS, particularly its frustration with religious, governmental, and medical institutions. He traces a trajectory from sexual promiscuity and gay liberation to the AIDS crisis to a new awareness of difference.

AIDS, Altman contends, resulted in dramatic changes: since it was a public health crisis initially affecting gay men primarily, governments were forced to deal with homosexuality; new forms of sexual expression were created; a greater stress was placed on non-sexual intimacy and affection; and the bond between gay men and lesbians was strengthened.

Altman praises the gay community's reaction to the AIDS crisis: "Only a culture as basically accepting of sex as the gay one could have developed the idea of 'safe sex' as a response to HIV, to have maintained an emphasis on sexual pleasure while trying to change people's behaviour away from risky practices, though not necessarily away from multiple partners and sexual adventure."

In *The Homosexualization of America*, Altman envisions a pooling of resources of gay and feminist activists: "In its way homosexuality depends upon both the blurring and strengthening of gender differences, for by defining attraction as within rather than between the sexes it throws into question all the assumptions about a 'natural' heterosexual attraction of opposites."

Queer Theory and Queer Life

Altman believes that homosexuality is constructed by social and political forces. As a result, he pays little attention to the search for a "gay gene" for, according to Altman, advocates of genetic causes for homosexuality shirk their political responsibility.

He is also skeptical of queer theory, declaring that "queer theory seems to me useful as an aesthetic term but has not all that much to do with everyday life or politics." He is even suspicious of theory itself: "I'm not a theorist, I have a magpie approach to theory, picking up a bit here and a bit there, putting it together in the nest. If it looks good, that's fine, it's something to be used, but it's not something to be venerated and worshipped."

Indeed, Altman prefers literature to sociology. He believes that sociology simply orders the world, but that "Literature, on the other hand, helps us understand how other people see the world, takes us into other people's understandings of their world. It also intuitively makes connections before the social sciences make them."

Generally, Altman is more concerned with queer practices than queer theory. "While it is intellectually important to constantly decentre and deconstruct assumptions about identity," he writes, "there is as much a need to construct positive myths that help create and unite communities and movements."

Australia, America, Asia

Altman has a love-hate relationship with the United States, which has been crucial in shaping his perception of the world: "the more I get to know it, the more I reject it. For all sort of classic psychological reasons I need it as an object both to hate and to love simultaneously." He is especially critical of two staples of American culture: "From the outside what is most striking about the United States is its faith in religion and the gun--and both kill."

Although he continues to write about and visit the U.S., Altman has lately shifted his focus to Asia. In his autobiography *Defying Gravity*, Altman recollects the change of consciousness that he has lived through: "the creation of a 'gay nation' and the simultaneous re-imagining of Australia as a multicultural society which for some purposes is part of an equally re-imagined 'Asia'."

In the memoir, he also turns to the question of identity and how it is constantly interrogated: "All of us live with multiple identities. . . . How we imagine these varying and changing identities helps determine how well we manage to live together as a society." In a related vein, he is interested in "the ways in which 'communities' and 'nations' are constantly created and re-created through human imagination" and in "a recognition of the central importance of human agency and imagination in creating new concepts of who we are and in what sort of society we wish to live."

In *Global Sex*, Altman investigates how globalization has changed how sex is understood, regulated, even practiced. The exportation of Western sexuality, he argues, has led to greater homogeneity, but at the expense of sexual inequality, exploitation, permissiveness, and, of course, AIDS.

He believes that, though desirable in the U.S., tolerance and difference may not play well in other corners of the world: "Globalization does not abolish difference as much as it redistributes it, so that certain styles and consumer fashions are internationalized while class divides are strengthened, often across national boundaries. The yuppie woman with her portable phone in Kuala Lumpur or São Paulo has more in common with her counterpart in Stuttgart or Minneapolis than do either with the rural or urban poor of their societies."

Altman's most recent book, *51st State?*, focuses on Australian identity in a U.S.-dominated world. He fears that Australia has been so Americanized that it is in danger of "fast becoming America's 51st state." The (liberal) tendency to attribute malign American influence to everything we feel uncomfortable about in the contemporary world, Altman suggests, is the downside of seeing the U.S. as the only model worthy of emulation; this trend only conceals the deeper question Australians must face: how does Australia imagine its future?

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About the Author

Nikolai Endres received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill in 2000. As an associate professor at Western Kentucky University, he teaches Great Books, British literature, classics, mythology, and gay and lesbian studies. He has published on Plato, Petronius, Gustave Flaubert, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mary Renault, Gore Vidal, Patricia Nell Warren, and others. His next project is a "queer" reading of the myth and music of Richard Wagner. He is also working on a book-length study of Platonic love as a homoerotic code in the modern gay novel.