

# Lesbians, gays and mainstream politics

For *Radical Philosophy*, Angela Mason's commentary on lesbian and gay politics in the 1990s was remarkably *un-radical*. The piece, which is little more than an electoral apologia, charts 'our' progress over the last twenty or so years and weds our future 'liberation' and equality to the antics of politicians, legislators and a political system which has rarely, if ever, been uninterestedly kind, or kind at all, to lesbians and gays.

While of course legal protection and an end to discrimination should be on the agenda of any reasonable organization, Mason's reliance on the outcome of the general election is repetitive and naive. Her 'this time we can surely expect a new government to sweep away discrimination' speaks as one who is weary of past treachery and deceit and, in its own terms, does not even sound hopeful. But why should we be that hopeful? We just need to look at the track record of all the political parties to see that our equality will not come from politicians who care more about careers and votes than anything else. She recalls but is barely critical of those so many Labour MPs who voted against an equal age of consent. What real basis is there for hoping Labour will support lesbians and gays, any more than there is a chance it will stop funding weapons research, pay decent benefits or renationalize the railways?

Despite several supposed 'turning points', the battle is not over, for it is a 'dangerous game'. Despite the historical example of the fleeting nature of 'rights' bestowed by party politicians, Mason somehow views the destruction of the liberal GLC as 'unthinkable'. Not content with assimilating lesbians and gays into the political machine, we are now poised for out-and-out integration into the military one. This completely unethical position, and lack of critique of the anti-humanitarian role of the military complex, the authoritarianism endemic and intrinsic to its command structure, is hailed as a viable possibility: 'we' lesbians

and gays want the same 'rights' as everyone and if that means participating in oppressive structures, well so be it.

History should teach us that relying on politicians for anything long lasting is a chimera. We have only come so far by relying on ourselves and building an alternative in our communities. I do not decry the arduous and difficult work of those who believe that working inside the Labour Party is the solution, or part of the solution, to our problems, but Mason leaves 'us' no other way out than Labour party politics. This route is presented as our only salvation. What if it fails yet again?

With no critique of the basis of this society which creates discrimination, with no analysis of authoritarian structures and personalities, in Mason's view the fate of lesbians and gays is dependent on the ebbing and flowing of capricious lawmakers and politicians. Bearing in mind that this 'window of opportunity may close', perhaps it is not worthy of our prolonged attention. If this tiny fenester does not get any larger, perhaps an idea is to change panorama and look towards a different kind of society and a politics which relies on a radical, ethical, diverse, direct actionist front, not on one which decaffeinate homo-sex and assimilates us into authoritarian, undemocratic, capricious institutions.

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## Guy Hocquenghem

I was disappointed in the review of my book *Guy Hocquenghem* in *Radical Philosophy* 82 (March–April 1997). The difficulties I had with it go beyond differences of evaluation, for I believe it has been seriously misrepresented.

There are some quibbles. The 'undue reliance on plot summary' in discussion of the fiction in fact consists, for an English-speaking audience after all, of one paragraph per (all but one) untranslated novel in a chapter of over 9,000 words. I acknowledge Hocquenghem's classical scholarship on page 80, and the lack of unity of his philosophy throughout, concluding

with this point on page 94. I am perfectly aware of the relationship between Hocquenghem and Schérer, but this book is not a biography, and detail of the literal-minded kind not its concern. More bizarrely and substantially, the reviewer chooses to ignore whole aspects of the book – the specificity of the French context in relation to Anglo-Saxon gay politics, the discussion of modernity in *L'Âme atomique* – while at the same time presenting as omissions ‘doubts’ about some of Hocquenghem’s ideas which are in fact there for all to read, and have been noted by other reviewers. My discussions of his views on rape (pp. 11–12), and paedophilia (pp. 48–50) are more developed than the reviewer implies, seeking both to avoid knee-jerk reactions and to adopt a critical distance. I also recognize

the gender blindness and the absence of lesbianism in Hocquenghem’s theories (for example, p. 93). I shall leave it to readers of *Radical Philosophy* to decide whether they, like David Macey, consider Benjamin and Bakhtin to be postmodernists.

As academics, we are all under pressure of time. And *Guy Hocquenghem* is a little book with no greater ambition than to help invigorate some contemporary debates through an exposition and contextualization of its subject. It surely deserves, however, to be reviewed with the same care as any other work.

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## NEWS

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### SWIP conference at Kent

Last year’s conference of the Society of Women in Philosophy (SWIP) was held at the University of Kent on 7 December. It was organized in conjunction with and financed by the Centre for Women’s Studies at Canterbury. For anyone, like myself, who had never attended a SWIP conference before, it was an opportunity to engage socially with colleagues, academics and students, as well as to discuss philosophical issues.

Adrian Cavarero opened the conference with an informative discussion of the question of Being. Her emphasis was not so much on ‘what’ we are, which she suggested would amount to a discussion on essence, and therefore a return to a disembodied self and all the dangers that go with it, but instead on ‘who’ we are. Cavarero began with a rereading of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*. Unknown to himself, his parentage in doubt, Oedipus is able to complete his life story not by identifying himself with the universal, as man, but by attending to the external presence of others. Autobiography, Cavarero thus argued, becomes less egocentric and instead more of a biographical narrative. This relationship between one and an other is a reciprocal one where all parties involved desire mutual ethical recognition of their own mediated uniqueness. Not only is the significance of context restored; so too is the possibility of change both within and between our selves. The ‘who’ we are, Cavarero ended with suggesting, amounts to an awareness of being-for-others as potential biographers.

The second speaker was Miranda Fricker, who presented a paper on ‘The Radicalization of Epistemology’. Though not entirely defending the teleological project supposedly characteristic of modernism, she nevertheless situated feminist philosophy firmly within an emancipatory feminist movement. Her intent was to undermine claims for the political efficacy of postmodernism, by arguing that its preoccupation with fragmentation, multiple identity and the local, while necessary, has its limits. Postmodern discourse might resist exclusion and overgeneralization, but it does not provide the tools for a critical understanding of societal relations, and thereby both courts conservatism and, albeit perhaps unintentionally, helps to contribute to epistemic oppression. She ended by calling attention to the best of postmodernism, but refused to align herself with the breakdown in rationality, truth and reality which postmodern discourse appears to demand.

Our final speaker, Jean Grimshaw, in ‘Philosophy and the Feminist Imagination’, relieved the intensity of the conference, allowing us the opportunity to play with and explore different means of expressing our self-images through the use of metaphor and anarchic language.

Thanks are due to Anne Seller and Sue Sherwood for organizing such a successful conference.

**Naomi Hammond**