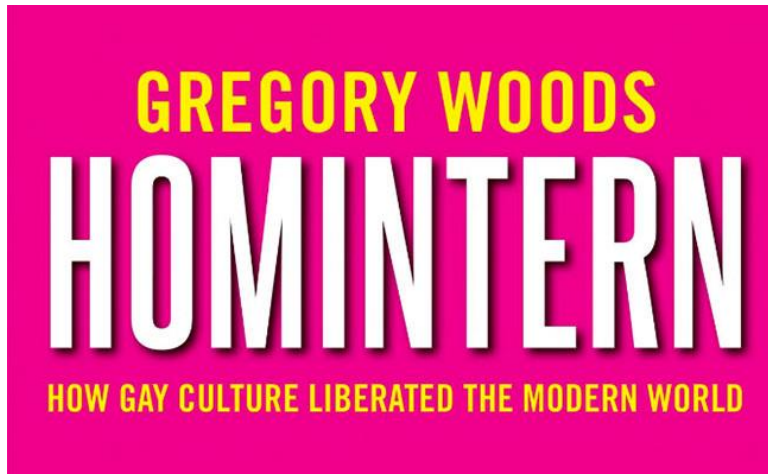


# 'Homintern' Is Not as Subversive and Liberating as Its Subject Matter

by [George de Stefano](#)

16 May 2016



What was unique and liberating about the gay influence on Western culture? Gregory Woods tells only part of the story.

## **HOMINTERN: HOW GAY CULTURE LIBERATED THE MODERN WORLD GREGORY WOODS**

(Yale University Press)

US: May 2016

In *Homintern: How Gay Culture Liberated the Modern World*, the British poet Gregory Woods sets out to explain how networks of gay men and lesbians exerted enormous influence on Western culture during the 20th century. He employs the term “Homintern” as a lexical shorthand for their cultural presence, stating that “imagined as a single network, it is either one of the major creative forces in the cultural development of the past century, or a sinister conspiracy against the moral and material interests of nation states.” Gay artists and intellectuals used the term ironically, as a play on Comintern, the Communist Third International established in 1919 by the Soviet Union; for homophobes, it represented a genuine threat, as pernicious as Communism.

Woods describes the Homintern as international, comprising men and women whose affinities, sexual and cultural, transcended borders. “The willingness of gay men and lesbians to associate across national boundaries throughout the last century led to extraordinary encounters, some fleeting, others more enduring; some social, some sexual, many creative.” “That many homosexual individuals... did exert massive cultural influence in the twentieth century is obvious,” he states. Gay men and lesbians were prominent in literature, theater, the visual arts, music, and dance; they ran influential salons and publishing houses, and hosted exhibitions. However, “for every one of these individuals, it is possible to name ten or so (presumed) heterosexuals in equivalent positions of cultural power.”

Gay people seem to be part of a conspiracy because they are unusual, not the norm, and therefore more likely to draw not only attention but condemnation. “It could be argued... that the true conspiracy is that of the homophobes... clubbing together to make life uncomfortable for queers.”

So is it that local and international networks of gay men and lesbians were influential, but no more so than straight cultural innovators and tastemakers? Is it that their sexuality, and the heterosexual hostility toward male and female homosexuality, were what defined the Homintern? What was unique and liberating, to use Woods’ term, about the gay influence on Western culture?

Woods observes that “the presence of lesbians and gay men in the artistic avant-garde was energizing, precisely because they looked at society from an unusual viewpoint and were apt to undermine previously long-accepted truths of human nature.” That, however, could be said of other minorities that Western societies have defined as “the other”, e.g., Jews, blacks, other ethnic and religious minorities, and political radicals. Woods doesn’t explain what it is about queer difference that has been subversive and liberating; he simply presumes that the gay presence itself unsettled “previously long-accepted truths”.

There are two major problems with this. Woods comes very close to a position for which he criticizes gay liberationists: that homosexuality itself is somehow intrinsically revolutionary. It also contradicts a recurring motif in the book: not a few of these purported revolutionaries were upper-class political conservatives, even reactionaries.

Woods’ account focuses mainly on Europe, but also on “the shores of the Mediterranean” and “the two-way traffic across the Atlantic”. The book begins in the late 19th century, when European scientists tried to categorize and explain people who were attracted to the same sex. (Károly Kertbeny, a German social reformer, coined the term “homosexual” in 1868; a year later, he invented “heterosexual”.)

During this time, “a succession of public scandals” involving homosexuality “brought the existence of such people out into the open.” To those discomfited by or morally opposed to homosexuality, there seemed to be all too many of them, and they were seen as constituting powerful cabals within culture-making institutions and in the arts. The most famous scandal, of course, was the fate of Oscar Wilde, persecuted, imprisoned, and exiled from the society that had made him a culture hero.

Like Wilde, many gay and lesbian cultural figures came from the “leisured”, that is, upper classes, where “bohemian lifestyles and manners were acceptable, subject to variously tacitly agreed restrictions.” These men and women had the means to travel; in Paris, southern Italy, Greece, North Africa, and Harlem they could escape the social prejudices of their homelands (and shed their own inhibitions), absorb and take inspiration from local cultures, and have sex with partners from very different class and cultural backgrounds.

In the late 1800s, the German aristocrat Wilhelm von Gloeden, for example, left his homeland and took up residence in Sicily. There he took arty nude photographs of young men (some of whom were his lovers), and entertained locals and international gay visitors, including Wilde, at his Taormina home.

Woods tracks his Hominternians through the Paris of Proust, Gide, Cocteau, and expatriates like Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney; the villas and beaches of Capri and Sicily; the nightclubs and literary salons of the Harlem Renaissance; pre-Hitler Berlin, with its uninhibited gay sexual cultures; the North African port city Tangier, when it attracted gay bohemians like Paul Bowles, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs; and Hollywood, when the studio system protected gay and lesbian

stars who stayed closeted (Rock Hudson) while casting out those who insisted on being “out” (director Dorothy Arzner). Gay and lesbian readers, and no doubt many straight ones, will be familiar with these well-trod routes and their famous travelers, and Woods’ account offers little that’s original or surprising.

*Homintern* centers mainly on men but lesbians hardly are neglected. Radclyffe Hall, author of the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*; Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas; historical novelists Marguerite Yourcenar and Patricia Nell Warren; the poets Audre Lorde and Elizabeth Bishop; and experimental novelist Djuna Barnes, among others, make their appearances. “The independence of lesbian women had its own lessons to convey within the context of the broader struggle for women’s equality,” Woods observes. “Despite being spoken of, and written off, as spinsters ... such women were often more or less secretly admired for the spirit of their nonconformity: they had chosen to be free—or free of men, at least; which may be the same thing.” Woods, however, doesn’t say who admired them, or explain how that admiration was “secretly” expressed.

Woods argues that although gay men and lesbians in the arts faced stigma and oppression, they also experienced approval of a certain kind: between the two world wars, “acceptance of homosexuality came to be seen as one of the measures of modernity.” He is interested in how ideas about male and female homosexuals “acquire status as lasting myths”—such images as “the gay aesthete, the modern Sodom, the homosexual spy, the sirens’ island, the tragic fall from grace, the Oriental pleasure dome, the sleazy dive, the pastoral idyll, the *Homintern* itself”—which duly take their place in the common narratives not only of homosexuality’s cultural status in the modern world, but of modernity itself.”

But which of these mythic images have endured, in what forms, and how have they influenced the larger culture, or “modernity itself”?

In the introduction to *Homintern*, Woods states that his is “a poet’s book” that seeks “to cast an image, or sequence of images, on the reader’s visual imagination, rather than persuade by linear argument.” The reader can accept it on these terms, or else find the lack of a coherent line of reasoning frustrating, resulting in a fragmented overview of gay and lesbian cultural accomplishment and influence.

In place of an argument, Woods too often serves up potted histories of his subjects and summaries of other authors’ more revealing (and rewarding) works. His section on Manuel Puig draws from the portrait of the Argentine novelist in *Eminent Maricones*, an essay collection by the Colombian-American author and poet Jaime Manrique. But Manrique’s writing about Puig is richer and more perceptive, as well as much more moving.

Woods writes that Burt Lancaster wanted to play the part of Molina, the gay, movie-infatuated prisoner who shares a cell with a straight Marxist revolutionary, in the film version of Puig’s *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*. Lancaster even re-worked an existing script to include more sex scenes between the prisoners. But Woods omits the detail that would contextualize what might seem a surprising move by a Hollywood star known for virile, he-man roles: Lancaster’s acknowledged bisexuality. Lancaster was too old for the part, and illness forced him to drop out. William Hurt got to play Molina and, in 1986, he won the Academy Award for Best Actor. Woods doesn’t say whether Puig saw the film. But he did. As he hilariously told Manrique, “La Hurt is so bad she’ll probably win an Oscar.”

*Homintern* often is politically questionable. Woods notes that among privileged, upper class gay men and lesbians, an attraction to right-wing politics was not uncommon; Radclyffe Hall and her lover Una Troubridge both were ardent supporters of Mussolini, for example. But Woods virtually ignores

leftists, one exception being Pasolini. Woods mentions the British poet Edward Carpenter as an advocate of same-sex love and a disciple of Walt Whitman, but overlooks his socialism. He comments that after the political and cultural uprisings of 1968, gay cultural figures increasingly moved leftwards. Yet he devotes far less attention to that left turn than he does to earlier generations of right-leaning esthetes, or to homophobia among straight leftists.

Nowhere is Woods' political commentary more confused than when, late in the book, he gets around to gay liberation. He repeatedly describes the movement, which emerged after the 1969 clash in New York between queers and cops known as "Stonewall" (an event he doesn't even mention) as "assimilationist". But it actually was oppositional. It was the gay rights movement, which followed gay liberation, that sought to assimilate into mainstream society by pursuing legal rights and an equality-based strategy. Gay liberation, a more short-lived movement, was explicitly linked to a larger leftist project of social, economic, and sexual liberation. Journals like *Gay Left* in the UK and *Come Out!* in the US, neither of which gets a mention from Woods, promoted not assimilation but a difference-based radicalism.

In the book's final chapter, "The New Politics", Woods presents the positions of same-sexers like Gore Vidal, Susan Sontag, Rainer Fassbinder, and Pasolini (among others) for whom "the idea of a politics of sexuality was often the stumbling block", but he doesn't share their views. Collective organizing exposed gays and lesbians "to terrible vulnerability, as under Nazism, and yet gave them the potential for considerable strength. What was needed was not mere 'coming out' in enormous numbers ... but an openness that was more than individual. Real social change demanded mutual identification on a grand scale." Woods cites one of the "benefits of subcultural solidarity": "Countries that did not have strong gay movements were slower in their responses to AIDS."

Oddly, though, Woods doesn't acknowledge the loss of so many cultural eminences to the epidemic, even some he writes about, such as: Latin American authors Reinaldo Arenas, Manuel Puig, and Severo Sarduy; cinematographer Nestor Almendros; filmmaker Derek Jarman; Rudolf Nureyev. Other important and influential figures who died from AIDS are entirely omitted: Broadway choreographer Michael Bennett; underground filmmaker Jack Smith; modern dance pioneer Alvin Ailey; disco diva Sylvester; documentary filmmaker Marlon Riggs. Including Ailey, Sylvester, and Riggs would've broadened the sparse discussion of black gays beyond James Baldwin and a few Harlem Renaissance notables.

Woods ends his discussion of contemporary gay politics (and the book) by observing that "Life is not a gay pride march, of course. People go back to their routines. When the march has dispersed and the marchers have gone home, they may be reminded that desire is both astonishing and unremarkable." This observation hangs there like a vestigial body part, superfluous, even pointless. Having dropped any mention of the Homintern some 40 pages earlier, he chooses not to discuss whether this construct from an earlier age of greater secrecy and oppression has any relevance in our age of unprecedented openness and acceptance (or, as some might say, assimilation).

By this point, readers are likely to feel that although Woods has offered some entertaining anecdotes and sharp aperçus, he's fallen short of his stated purpose: demonstrating how "gay culture liberated the modern world".