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”Unnatural Sex”

Jens Rydström, *Sinners and Citizens: Bestiality and Homosexuality in Sweden, 1880–1950*, Diss, Stockholm 2001. 401 s.

Jens Rydström’s *Sinners and Citizens: Bestiality and Homosexuality in Sweden, 1880–1950* is a landmark study in the history of sexuality. It contributes countless new insights to the field, as it offsets a number of key biases already apparent in the relatively short, quarter-century historiography. In a field now dominated by studies of the United States and Western Europe, it illuminates distinctive sexualities in Scandinavia, Sweden, and – within that – numerous cities, towns, and villages. In a field laden with studies of major cities, it examines rural patterns along with urban ones. In a field preoccupied by sexual identities, communities, and politics, it brings a needed focus to sexual practices. In a field blessed with ever more lesbian and gay community studies, it boldly reintegrates what many gay activists would rather leave uncoupled. That is, in its simultaneous discussion of sex between men and sex by men with animals, *Sinners and Citizens* reminds us that, for hundreds of years, same-sex sexuality and bestiality were a conceptually linked pair, two closely related kinds of unnatural intercourse. In a field flush with publications in English, Rydström enters the fray as a non-native speaker, determined to reach a wide audience with his provocative interventions.

This work’s success goes well beyond its innovations within the field, however. It proves an exemplary history in many other respects. It is elegantly written, characterized by clarity, judiciousness, and subtle wit. It is thorough, taking in a sizeable period, geography, and caseload. And it is empathetic, attempting to understand the sometimes draconian surveillant authorities – pastors, politicians, policemen, and physicians – while sensitively portraying the everyday lives of men who sought intimacy and sexual satisfaction in unconventional ways.

The work’s impressive sweep and lofty ambitions are grounded by a meticulous, indeed conservative organizational structure. Divided neatly into two parts, the work makes clear its central argument. It argues change over time, a principal historical transformation, as it delineates the before and after: the sodomy paradigm from 1880 to 1920 and the homosexual paradigm from 1920 to 1950. Moreover, Parts One and Two thematically mirror one another, with four chapters each on legislation, bestiality, rural same-sex sexuality, and urban same-sex sexuality. The last three of these four are almost formulaic in their sequential treatment of sexual practice then social control; and the second and fourth further tackle forensic psychiatry. Treated separately in a final ninth chapter, female same-sex sexuality receives as much attention as these particular sources

seem to allow. Even as the author demonstrates Sweden's dubious distinction of criminalizing both female and male same-sex intercourse in the nineteenth century, the former is shown to have been far less frequently policed than the latter. And bestiality cases nearly always involved men. Rydström explains all these people and phenomena by reference to their social and economic contexts, situating sexualities within the material conditions of their production. He weighs various causal factors and judges their relative importance. It is testament to his perceptiveness and articulateness that he can hold it all within his vision and convey it all to his readers.

Quantity and Quality

The sheer quantity of primary documents consulted is astounding. In addition to mining government reports, the daily press, scientific journals, forensic psychiatric statements, mental hospital records, church periodicals, and sex reform movement literature, Rydström sent questionnaires to 286 informants born before 1945, and he conducted interviews with several. Most impressive, the author unearthed 2,333 court cases about bestiality and same-sex sexuality, which form the core of the study. These he found in Sweden's eight provincial archives and in 84 of its 96 district courts. With an elaborate system of crosschecking against official statistics and other sources, honed over a four-year search, Rydström seems to have located all extant cases. It is a massive achievement.

So what does he make of the data? Rydström's hefty sample allows broad quantitative generalizations, and these he presents in several charts, maps, and tables, appropriately placed throughout the text. Sadly, there is no list of charts and illustrations to accompany the contents page. Regarding violations of chapter 18, section 10 of the Swedish Penal Code, "forbidding fornication against nature," Rydström identifies thirteen large-scale prosecutions over the period, each involving 10 to 33 men (table 10, p 284). Interestingly, these are not limited to gay urban enclaves. Rather, they stretch from south to north; from Malmö in 1911 to Västerbotten County in 1941; and also in 1941, from Stockholm, population 546,000, to Långsele, population 700 (map, p 309). Pointing to Rydström's larger thesis, table 9 demonstrates the substantial increase over time in arrests for mutual masturbation between men, as compared to anal penetration (p 245).

Skillful qualitative research turns these numbers into flesh-and-blood Swedes. The chart showing a dramatic increase in the average age of sex partners (figure 4, p 292) is contextualized by passages describing the paradox of anti-gay law enforcement. Justified in part as combating child sexual abuse – cases of which remained consistently low from 1915 to 1945 – the stepped-up policing of same-sex intercourse meant that older consenting partners wound up in court. Rydström's interview with one of these men adds life to the architectural sketch of the primary arrest site, a public urinal – now a staple of gay history monographs.

Lars-Erik V. remembers his arresting officer as an overzealous cop who was an embarrassment to his fellow officers. But as Rydström points out, however, fifty years afterward, Lars-Erik seems to have minimized the trauma, forgetting for example that his mother wanted doctors to administer a cure for her son.

This attention to the modifications of memory mirrors the great care and sober reasoning that Rydström applies to his primary documents. At several junctures, he reminds his audience of the limitations and erasures of legal and medical testimonies, generally without interrupting narrative flow.

Shifts and Linkages

If Rydström breaks new ground in terms of themes, sources, and sites, he is on well-travelled terrain in terms of period. The late nineteenth century has long been the temporal focus of what Eve Sedgwick critiques as "The Great Paradigm Shift". Around this time, perhaps earlier, homosexuality in the Western World increasingly was understood as an identity as opposed to a behaviour. Concern over sinful acts, of which all people were capable, yielded to concern over homosexual persons, a distinctive minority. Thus, the modern homosexual emerged as a type, a species. Usefully, the multi-lingual Rydström provides us with Michel Foucault's oft-quoted passage in the original French: "Le sodomite était un relaps, l'homosexuel est maintenant une espèce" (p 9). Scholars such as John D'Emilio and Jeffrey Weeks have further pinned this shift to social and economic factors, especially the rise of urban, industrial capitalism and the perceived advantages of wage labour and anonymity in the cities.

Somewhat similarly, Rydström convincingly argues a shift from a rural penetrative sodomy paradigm to an urban masturbatory homosexual paradigm. Though he dates the shift roughly from the 1920s and 1930s, when Swedes became predominantly city-dwellers, his model should not be seen as lagging in time behind these others. Sweden should not be seen as lagging behind larger American and European capitals in terms of gay culture development. Quite the contrary, Rydström's project is to specify the interaction between rural and urban locales, to chart the movement of ideologies across these spaces. So Rydström is perceptive where others have had blinders in that he tests these hypothesized shifts on the ground, in both domains. He explores non-urban as well as urban realms, whereas his scholarly predecessors have limited their studies to the teleologically advanced modern gay ghettos. Thus, though Rydström sometimes lapses into the language of "advanced" and "developed" urban cultures, he can elucidate rural sexualities as different from – not more backward than nor inferior to – urban sexualities. This also enables Rydström to chart identifiable changes in sexual practices across time and place.

Here the linkage between bestiality and homosexuality proves crucial. "Of the 'three sodomitical sins,' only bestiality had been continuously and explicitly

outlawed since the mediaeval laws" (p 39). But when same-sex intercourse was again proscribed, in the Penal Code of 1864, it was directly linked to bestiality as "fornication against nature". Fornication, in this context, was conceived as vaginal or anal penetration, and early cases of both bestiality and homosexuality often turned on the question of insertion and sometimes even ejaculation. Thus in the first half of the period, the experiences of the farm, where bestiality was more pronounced, shaped the interpretations of the court. And the relative culpability of two male sex partners was measured by a bestial standard.

As Rydström explains, men who anally penetrated other men were seen as little different from men who vaginally penetrated animals. They both had chosen unfortunate receptacles when their "natural" urges for women had been stymied. Thus, a penetrated or receptive male partner could no more be blamed than the animal. This contrasts sharply with the increased culpability and perceived femininity of receptive male sex partners in various histories of homosexuality from North America and Latin America.

From the authorities' point of view, the distribution of guilt between active and passive sexual partners seems to have been rather different than in other countries, since the usual stigma attributed to the passive part was missing. Instead the passive part was exculpated and regarded as a tool for the active part's evil lust. This can perhaps be attributed to the strength of the bestiality discourse, according to which the animal was not to blame for the crime. (p 15)

Thus, investigating a highly localized environment, Rydström has made – to my knowledge – a wholly unique insight in comparative histories of sexuality. He has provided one vital exception to the rule offered in Leila J Rupp's important article "Toward a Global History of Same-Sex Sexuality": "The act of putting one's penis in the mouth, vagina, or anus of another is privileged, but the act of enclosing a penis with one's mouth, vagina or anus is not".¹ Rydström also asserts that oral sex between men was relatively uncommon over this period and was often conceived as foreign, as French or American.

Country and City

Rydström is at his best elaborating the distinctive conditions of rural life and their impact upon human sexuality. As he argues, to regularly witness farm animals copulating stirred passions and sparked ideas, especially among those very workers charged with the breeding of livestock. The particular case of 18-year-old Anders Karlsson in 1880 is well utilized to illustrate the general pattern.

1. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 2001: 10, p 300.

According to Rydström, the case was "typical in many ways: young farm hands were the most common group of perpetrators, cows were the most common sexual object, and women [in this case, the milkmaid] were most often those who detected the crime, though they left it to the head of the household to take the matter to the police" (70). Further, "of all 751 cases of bestiality in my study, between 1880 and 1944, there were only six cases in which male animals were involved" (p 71). Thus, "the male perpetrators of bestiality, with few exceptions, chose female animals, making bestiality a heterosexual, 'heterospecial' endeavour" (p 16). Still, the zoophile did not become a species in the Foucaultian sense. No stable identity could be crafted around these sexual proclivities, though Rydström does concede that the Swedish language, unlike many others, provided a noun for these men: *tidelagare*.

Innovations in communication and transportation – often associated with the city – perhaps had greater consequences for sexuality in the countryside.

Thus, in 1917, the bank manager Frans Ahlberg in Bergsjö (population 500) could use the telephone to call to the nearest town, Hudiksvall (population 7,564), 25 km south of Bergsjö, and ask a young man there to take the evening train to Bergsjö and join Ahlberg in the railway restaurant. The telephone and the railway allowed him to seek his sexual contacts outside of the little community where he lived. (p 95)

The bicycle also radically altered mobility, though its advantages over the horse and its dependence upon improved roads are not fully articulated. Additionally, this already incisive history of technology could benefit from expanded discussion of classified advertisements in the contact pages of newspapers such as *Allas Veckotidning*. If the pseudonymous Martin Faxé, from a 600-inhabitant trading post in Lapland, could use ads for "male friends" to "build a network of homosexuals all across Sweden" (p 273) in the 1930s and 1940s, how many others did so then and earlier? And how does this enhance our understanding of homosexuality in so-called isolated places? How did such print media technologies shape rural sexuality?

Meanwhile in the "enlightened" cities, policemen pursued homosexuals with greater intensity, even as some politicians advocated decriminalization of homosexual acts, which was achieved in 1944. In the interim, "what can be interpreted as increasing tolerance was rather a redefinition of the boundaries of permissible sex and a more rigid policing of transgressions" (p 4). In other words, the shift from the rural penetrative sodomy paradigm to the urban masturbatory homosexual paradigm amounted to an expansion of criminal acts, such that mutual masturbation, for example, was more easily prosecuted under chapter 18, section 10, as long as the law was in effect. And the seemingly humane, lenient

sentencing of the convicted to psychiatric care, as opposed to the customary three months hard labour, often proved much more onerous. Trapped in a mental hospital for two years and threatened with castration, Martin Faxe concluded that "a prison term would have been preferable in all respects" (p 274). Though the widespread adoption of yet another technology of communication, the typewriter, helped Faxe churn out letter after letter of appeal and helped authorities craft longer reports on the criminals – all making excellent fodder for this assiduous historian – the discursive explosion mostly supported repressive regulatory efforts, he asserts.

Still, the cities and university towns in particular sustained a small but savvy sex reform movement dating from 1880. So Rydström's periodization begins not just with Karlsson's arrest but a daring speech by Uppsala philosopher Pontus Wikner, who urged societal tolerance of "borderline people" (p 56). Well-known himself as a lover of young men, Wikner seems to have sparked generations of reformers, culminating in the 1933 founding of the eminently effective Swedish Association for Sexual Education (RFSU). Their intrepid leader Elise Ottesen-Jensen and other activists counselled lesbians and gays by mail and even administered a contact service, facilitating numerous introductions between rural people especially. The RFSU would be followed in 1950, at this study's close, by the founding of the modern lesbian and gay movement and the Swedish Federation for Sexual Equality (RFSL): "These courageous people, who began their work for homosexual emancipation in the worst possible climate, by their actions illustrated Foucault's words, that where there is power there is resistance" (p 360).

Practices and Personages

Foucault indeed has been important for this historian, and he adheres closely and productively to social constructionist thought, holding that "homosexual identity is created not discovered" (p 8). But there is an interesting tension in this work between queer acts – to lump together all non-normative sexual acts, including homosexual, bestial, and others – and queer identities – the homosexual, the zoophile, and others. With shrewd intelligence and subtle sarcasm, Rydström repeatedly and rightly interrogates the authorities' distinction between the constitutionally homosexual and the pseudo-homosexual, a person who engaged in homosexual behaviour but defied homosexual identity. The pseudo-homosexual is like mid-twentieth-century American formulations of so-called situational homosexuality in prisons. There in sex-segregated surroundings, inmates engaged in homosexual acts that they seemingly otherwise – outside the prison? in a cultural vacuum? – would not have. Given that there is no cultural vacuum, that there are perhaps no sexual desires, meanings, behaviours, identities, or regulations that are culture-independent, floating free of culture, then isn't all sexuality situational? If part of the project of lesbian and gay history is to

denaturalize those particular sexual ideologies which parade as universal – which not only are posited as statistically normative but also are violently enforced as morally normative to paraphrase Michael Warner – then shouldn't we question any sexuality that is claimed as "natural"? Or to put it another way, isn't all sexuality, in a sense, unnatural?

These sorts of questions come to mind when Rydström probes the possible motivations for bestiality. At times, Rydström too-readily adopts and perpetuates "the most common way to interpret these acts [...] as something one did for the lack of something better" (p 91). To pronounce something *better* is to make a moral judgment, which the author has pledged to avoid. But to avoid "letting [my own] feelings colour my study" (p 17) is perhaps to shirk some of the responsibilities of authorship, of disclosure. Because feelings inevitably do colour studies. Rydström concedes that "some practices [presumably most if not all acts of bestiality] I would strongly condemn were I to pass judgment" (p 18); but he maintains the posture of withholding judgment, even as he embraces an "openness" designed to forward "the emancipatory ambitions of my project [presumably for homosexuals]" (p 32). Is homosexuality propounded, naturalized or normativized at the expense of bestiality?

To be fair, when Rydström slightly elaborates the standard interpretation as "lack of access to a 'natural' outlet for the sexual urge" (p 84), he places *natural* knowingly in quotation marks. But is the sexual urge – a supposedly all-powerful male sex drive which some "lost control of" (p 85) – thereby naturalized? And is Rydström about the business of delineating an acceptable variety of bestiality when he movingly describes cases of "genuine affection" for animals, men "genuinely attracted to animals" (p 74), "genuinely interested in animals as sexual objects" (p 77). That is, by illuminating cases of dairy workers and stable boys given to kissing, caressing, and yes, having sex with cows and horses out of an essentialized desire, does scholar Rydström participate in the production of a modern zoophile identity as sexologists did for the modern homosexual identity? If so, fine; let's discuss the consequences. But I believe Rydström is much too clever an intellectual to withdraw from, obscure, or deny any consequences of the exercise in the name of a long-dead objectivity.

Rydström subtly distances himself from one of his two principal subjects, generously thanking his friends in the preface for "putting up with all my disgusting talk about bestiality during lunch hours" (p iii). Similarly, he implies ignorance of Norwegian vulgarity and male cross-dressing by thanking others in the notes for information about the two. These would be very small points indeed were Rydström not faced with interpreting at least two transgender figures, Karl (a.k.a. Helga) Lundström and Gustaf Ross, as well as one intersexual figure, the pseudonymous Erik Andersson. Formerly known as hermaphrodites, intersexuals simultaneously have some bodily features associated with maleness and some

associated with femaleness, as analysed most recently and effectively by scholar Ann Fausto-Sterling. Why then does Rydström not accept Andersson's own statement that "he [sic] was a hermaphrodite" (p 241)? Instead, Rydström concludes "that what is remarkable in the case is of course the firm conviction of Erik that he [sic] was a woman" (p 242). The case further shows, he states, that "archaic explanations focussing on the idea of hermaphroditism could still thrive" (p 256). Part of the underlying work of this project is that some sexualities become archaic, others are made natural.

A stellar achievement, *Sinners and Citizens* naturalizes the previously unnatural: homosexuality in Sweden. Though bestiality was likewise decriminalized in 1944 – albeit more quietly – its moral status is unclear in this study and in Sweden today. Thus, this marvelously suggestive study leaves us questioning. Is all sex, at core, unnatural?

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