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Queer Amsterdam 1945–2010

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Foreplay and context

World War II with the German occupation (1940–45) was a definite break in Dutch history. But this was not so much the case for homosexuals. The general picture is that discrimination was common before, during and after the war and that, in fact, the 1950s had the highest numbers of prosecutions for gay-related sex crimes. But in the post-war years things started to change and there were signs of greater acceptance. In 1946, some courageous men from Amsterdam restarted the homosexual rights movement. They launched a monthly journal in January 1940 just before the occupation but had to stop in its wake on 15 May. They were not the first to start such a movement. In 1912, a chapter of the German WHK (Wissenschaftliches Humanitäres-Komitee or Scientific Humanitarian Committee) was formed; it was called the *Nederlandsch Humanitair Wetenschappelijk Komitee* (Dutch Humanitarian Scientific Committee, NWHK). This was mainly the work of Jacob Anton Schorer (1866–1957) of The Hague though he halted his endeavour in 1940. After the occupation, a younger generation led by Nico Engelschman (1913–88) took over. The new organization was called *Shakespeare Club* and soon changed its name to *Cultuur en Ontspannings Centrum* (Centre for Culture and Recreation, COC). The NWHK was originally just a desk and an irregular newsletter with a library in Schorer's house; the COC was a membership organization with an office that organized lectures and social meetings. It published a magazine and founded the *International Committee for Sexual Equality* (ICSE). The Dutch homosexual rights movement has now existed for a century and has had its seat in Amsterdam since 1946. The focus of this chapter, though, is Amsterdam's rise to international fame as a gay and sex capital in the 1960s and 1970s and

its slow demise afterwards, while at the same time contesting the idea of the city as a gay utopia. Typically, when homosexuality is discussed in Holland, it nearly always concerns men. And indeed, the specific anti-homosexual article 248bis (1911–71) was concerned 99 per cent of the time with males.¹ In 2007, 96 per cent of anti-gay violence cases reported to the Amsterdam police concerned men.² As such the focus of this chapter is more on men than women. We find through the examination of interviews, newspapers, archives and secondary literature that Amsterdam has a reputation as one of the most sexually liberated cities for gay men in particular; in this chapter it is argued that this positive (self) evaluation needs nuancing. Too many problems with straight norms, discrimination and invisibility still haunt this idea of the city being a 'gay and lesbian Mecca'.³

Social situation

The discrimination homosexuals faced in the post-war years was manifold. Family, friends and colleagues would often reject homosexuals. This was related to religious beliefs that made homosex a sin unmentionable among Christians. At the same time, it was seen as a medical pathology and criminal offence. The silencing of queer issues may have been advantageous because it meant that the public perception of homosexuality among straight people remained low. The rejection of gay men was stronger than of that of lesbians for three reasons. The first issue was anal sex, the second, effeminacy and the third, the seduction of adolescents. Most insults towards gay people turned on the first two themes with variations of slurs from 'bottom' and 'brown' to 'sissy' and 'nelly'. The third reproach related to relationships between adults and minors of the same sex. In 1911, the Netherlands was the first country to include an article in the criminal law (248bis) that created a different age of consent for homo- and heterosexual relations, 21 and 16 years, respectively. It was based on the idea that since homosexuals did not reproduce they had to recruit youngsters to fill their ranks.⁴ This legal discrimination was the reason behind Schorer's decision to start the *NWHK*. Another legal article that affected homosexuals was the one about public indecency. It was not only the ways of having sex that were scrutinized, but also certain ways of being. From the late nineteenth century, the Netherlands witnessed, alongside other Western European countries, a debate about the cause of homosexuality. Around 1900, Amsterdam physicians Arnold Aletino and Lucien von Römer followed German Karl Ulrichs in describing homosexuality as a natural variation with homosexuals, therefore needing equal rights. Their argument was taken up by medical people who proposed that 'sexual inversion' might be an innate, but pathological condition. So homosexuality was at that time in the Netherlands a sin, crime and disease. It was nothing to be proud of and was often a source of shame and difficulty for the men and women themselves and their families and friends.

The situation worsened after the introduction of new sex laws in 1911,⁵ strongly promoted by new Christian parties that participated in the government of the Netherlands from the World War I until 1994. From the 1930s on, medical therapies – including castration for ‘sex criminals’ – strengthened the social rejection homosexuals faced. This pressure continued to grow until the 1950s. Not only had the number of cases for sex with minors been rising, so too had public indecency. Moreover, municipalities introduced rules that made it illegal to remain for longer than 5 minutes in a public toilet. Amsterdam did so in 1955. But growing sexual repression meant that social resistance mounted.

Gay sex at a breaking point

The homosexual scene had very different forms before the 1960s sexual revolution.⁶ In the 1930s, Amsterdam had perhaps a dozen bars catering to gays and lesbians. These did not operate simultaneously. They were of two types: more exclusively homosexual ones and mixed ones in the Red Light District where queers hung out with prostitutes and their clients. Both were often owned or run by lesbians who had made money in the sex industry. The bars were closely watched by the vice squad who visited known venues regularly.⁷ Although there was no law forbidding queer bars, the police used its discretionary power. Bar owners protected themselves in different ways against inspections. They had doormen who warned against arrival of ‘Russen’ (Russians, slang for officers) and ‘uilen’ (owls, heterosexuals). They also saw to it that clients didn’t do anything reproachable (same-sex kissing, intimacy or dancing most obviously). Controlling police officers relied on the notion that gay men were effeminate and lesbians mannish both in clothing and behaviour. So a woman with short hair, drinking gin and smoking cigars was classified as lesbian.

The main part of the gay scene, however, was an extensive public sex circuit in which not only homosexuals but also heterosexuals participated. The delineation of identities was not so embedded in those times. The sexual border traffic was made possible because many young straight men who wanted sex had very few options as women were married and were meant to stay faithful, while the unmarried were meant to keep their virginity. Prostitutes were for many males simply too expensive. Their only means of sexual release was to do it with other, often homosexual men, for money or for free. Some may have paid for the more effeminate men who worked as hustlers. My respondents mentioned an older queen who still worked from his home in the 1950s as a whore in the Red Light District, with rouge, powder and female attire, and attracting a male heterosexual clientele. Gays found it a mystery how they could make money. In other cases, young straight or questioning men derived some economic advantage from having sex with homosexuals – a bed to sleep in, drinks or food,

a present or money as in other European cities. Sexual roles were clearly separated in unofficial ideology: real 'straight' men had 'active' (fucker, sucked) and 'unmasculine' gay men 'passive' roles (fucked, sucker). This terminology had less to do with what gay or straight and active or passive meant but more with what was seen as disgusting in terms of transgression of gender roles.

The main place for public sex was in or near one of the city's 50 urinals or dozen parks that witnessed sexual activity. Most cottages were in the city centre and men went from one to the other, making tours to find sex partners. This was the pivotal location of sexual border traffic between straight and gay. It was dangerous both because of police and popular sentiment and also very effective because, as a respondent said, 'there you see first what you elsewhere see last'. Already in the late nineteenth century, public toilets had been designed with little success in such a way as to prevent gay sex: lamps, separated urinals, open space at the top and bottom of cubic walls so the police could see from the outside what happened within.⁸ Swimming pools were less known for homosexual and gay saunas developed only in the 1960s. As an urban street culture, queer sex could begin at any place where men met: in 'normal' bars and cinemas, in front of shop windows, at newspaper stalls, in train stations, on markets and fairs. Male hustlers could be found in the centre on Rembrandtplein and Singel until the 1970s, and until 2000 in Central Station. Ganymedes (male prostitutes) and clients could consummate sex not only at the customer's home but also in dark alleys, urinals, parks or 'one hour'-hotels in the Red Light District (where people could rent a room for an hour to have sex). In other words, gay life was until the 1960s part of public life. Notwithstanding social taboos and its public nature, this kind of contact was widespread from at least the late seventeenth century until the late 1970s when it slowly disappeared in supposedly more tolerant times. It moved to semi-public spaces – dark rooms and saunas – and out of the city to highway stops.⁹

The rise of a gay capital

After the war another more respectable scene developed in exclusively gay bars and discos. They rarely catered to lesbian women and straight people. These bars set a new trend of gay men getting into a subculture hidden behind closed doors. The numbers of these bars and discos grew quickly. They were soon left alone by the vice squad and existed for extended periods of time. They also became more fashionable. Bars have always been quite small in Amsterdam because of the architecture of the city but both discos *DOK* and *COC's Schakel* (meaning link) that were founded in 1952 were grandiose by comparison. Soon they attracted great numbers of male homosexuals, not only from Holland but also from England, Germany, France, Belgium and beyond – including US soldiers who were stationed in

