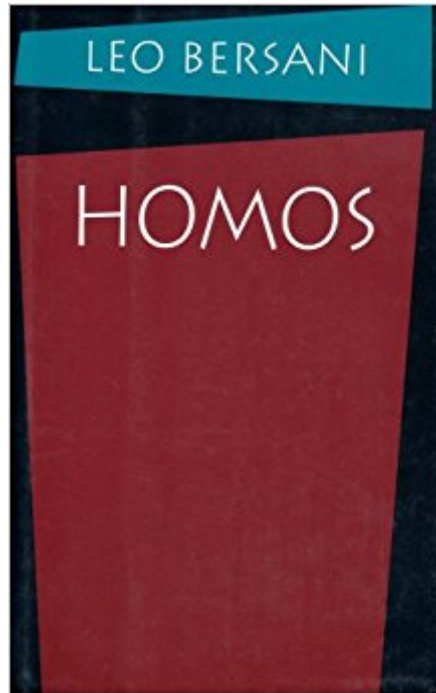


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# Homos



## Synopsis

Acclaimed for his intricate, incisive, and often controversial explorations of art, literature, and society, Leo Bersani now addresses homosexuality in America. Hardly a day goes by without the media focusing an often sympathetic beam on gay life--and, with AIDS, on gay death. Gay plays on Broadway, big book awards to authors writing on gay subjects, Hollywood movies with gay themes, gay and lesbian studies at dozens of universities, openly gay columnists and even editors at national mainstream publications, political leaders speaking in favor of gay rights: it seems that straight America has finally begun to listen to homosexual America. Still, Bersani notes, not only has homophobia grown more virulent, but many gay men and lesbians themselves are reluctant to be identified as homosexuals. In *Homos*, he studies the historical, political, and philosophical grounds for the current distrust, within the gay community, of self-identifying moves, for the paradoxical desire to be invisibly visible. While acknowledging the dangers of any kind of group identification (if you can be singled out, you can be disciplined), Bersani argues for a bolder presentation of what it means to be gay. In their justifiable suspicion of labels, gay men and lesbians have nearly disappeared into their own sophisticated awareness of how they have been socially constructed. By downplaying their sexuality, gays risk self-immolation--they will melt into the stifling culture they had wanted to contest. In his chapters on contemporary queer theory, on Foucault and psychoanalysis, on the politics of sadomasochism, and on the image of "the gay outlaw" in works by Gide, Proust, and Genet, Bersani raises the exciting possibility that same-sex desire by its very nature can disrupt oppressive social orders. His spectacular theory of "homo-ness" will be of interest to straights as well as gays, for it designates a mode of connecting to the world embodied in, but not reducible to, a sexual preference. The gay identity Bersani advocates is more of a force--as such, rather cool to the modest goal of social tolerance for diverse lifestyles--which can lead to a massive redefining of sociality itself, and of what we might expect from human communities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

At least since the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which marked the beginning of the Gay Rights movement, the process of coming out of the closet has been a personal milestone of individual liberation. Dealing openly with friends and family has usually been seen as a positive move toward greater acceptance of the homosexual by society at large. Now, however, University of California professor Bersani has turned this idea on its head. The author takes the contrary view that greater visibility will, at the very least, annihilate gay culture and make gays and lesbians an easier target for any future antigay backlash. Intellectually, Bersani wants to have it both ways. For example, he accuses the gay fringe, drag most especially, of validating the dominant heterosexual power paradigm while at the same time decrying the "degaying" of gay life as assimilationist. At its most radical, the whole argument may be specious, since, as the author himself points out, the very term homosexual is a fairly recent construct that unrealistically limits the broad range of human sexual behavior. Nevertheless, Bersani's comments make for interesting if rather academic reading. Suitable for large gay/lesbian collections and academic libraries. Jeffery Ingram, Newport P.L., Ore. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Perhaps no one since Leo Bersani in "Is the Rectum a Grave?" has written so convincingly against the danger of homosexual assimilation as Leo Bersani in *Homos*... One of the strongest elements of [this book] is Bersani's attack on things which promote a 'denial of sex,' whether it be sex acts themselves or, more importantly, the context in which those sex acts are made possible... *Homos* is a profound piece of imaginative literature. (Dale Peck Voice Literary Supplement) In *Homos*, Leo Bersani effectively attacks some sacred cows of gay cultural theory. Most obviously, he argues against the tenet that gay and lesbian identities are socially constructed and so ultimately (indeed, preferably) dissolvable... Refreshingly, [Bersani] also does not skate round sensitive questions such as the status of sadomasochism within gay sexual practice, and the tortuousness of the political liaison between gays and lesbians... Bersani emerges as our most persuasive advocate of homosexual identities that offer and require social resistance--he terms this "anticommunitarianism"--but also as perhaps the only writer in the field who convincingly brings

together psychological and sociological accounts of sexuality. (Richard Canning New Statesman & Society) Bersani engages with questions which the gay movement cannot ignore. (Times Literary Supplement) In his provocative and sure-to-be-controversial book, *Homos*, Bersani argues for the need to preserve the 'otherness' that he maintains is the essential core of homosexual identity. (David Wiegand San Francisco Chronicle) *Homos* is one of the most interesting books to appear in lesbian and gay literature--in fact its vision is so broad that it places lesbian and gay readers centre stage in what could be a revolution. (Our Times) Leo Bersani, one of the most interesting, original and sophisticated of...literary historians, has written primarily on Modernism, from Baudelaire to Beckett and Genet, using Freud's metapsychology as a way of penetrating into the radical implications of their thought...[His] work...[is] a surprise and a revelation, both careful and highly original...It is deeply exciting to engage with Bersani's ideas. They allow us to open up traditional psychoanalytic theory, so that it is no longer a mere therapeutic strategy, and consequently a device for social control and homogeneity, but instead a larger perspective for understanding and valuing those possibilities and differences that can constitute human experience. (Kenneth Lewes Psychoanalytic Books) *Homos* is an extremely persuasive analysis of the "anticommunal" freedom made possible by "perverse" sexuality...Bersani's argument is at once subtle, even brilliant. (Peggy Phelan Contemporary Sociology)

Insightful, literate, articulate look at gay culture that remains current today. Put into words ideas that have been on my mind for some time. Highly recommended.

Bersani's *\*Homos\** is arguably the most underappreciated text in the academic canon of queer theory. The book is not only the foundation for the "no future" turn in the field but also one of the earliest critiques of gay and lesbian visibility in American culture and politics. In a twist to the conventional logic that motivates gay rights activism, Bersani contends that the drive toward visibility, representation, and tolerance has denuded gay identity as such of its sexually specific character (i.e., the "desire for the same"). It's as though gay rights activism has had to mute its erotic lifeworld in order to gain respectability in American society. Bersani suggests the trade off isn't worth it, in part because such a pact doesn't challenge power relations in toto, thus leaving the door open for future homophobic attacks. Along with mainstream gay rights activism, Bersani is concerned to identify how then-emergent trends in queer theory seemed to follow the liberal/tolerance script. Indeed the book's most insightful moments inhere in Bersani showing how queer theory elides the specificity of same-sex desire in courting "subversive" notions of sexual

practice. In withering critiques of Judith Butler, \*Paris Is Burning\*, and S/M culture, Bersani says that queer theory has made a fetish of the micro-politics of performance and given up on a wholesale challenge to the structures of power by way of same-sex desire. Bersani's readings are refreshing because they take queer politics to task from a standpoint of wanting to radicalize it -- and to do so through gay erotics, not platitudes about how queerness works against the "system." \*Homos\* elaborates on Bersani's controversial but brilliant essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" (1988). The book is not as precise in its theoretical argument as I wanted it to be, which is why I'm giving it four stars. For those who want Bersani's essential point in a compact form, I recommend going to the essay before the book. Still, \*Homos\* deserves extended study and revisiting among scholars interested in queer theory, gay and lesbian studies, and contemporary social critique.

This is the most reasonable, well organized work on gay political culture in existence. Bersani delves beyond the rhetoric, and into the psyche of society and the gay culture, making clear why "de-gaying gayness" is a travesty to all parts of society. It is a must read for anyone grappling with their sense of society, belonging, be-ing.

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