
This fine work has been unpublished and virtually unknown in the United States, despite its having been quite influential in the United Kingdom. As has so often been the case with works demanding more widespread attention than they have received, Transaction Publishers has attempted to rectify this situation by making it available to American social scientists.

Holbrook’s central thesis, that “sex has become increasingly separate from the rest of existence, especially in the realm of discourse,” was not breathtakingly new even when originally published, but it is the detail and filigree with which he supports his thesis that commend this book to anyone working in an area even peripherally related to its subject.

It is in the nature of a work defending such a thesis that it will easily “convince” the already-converted, but meet vigorous resistance from those who find the thesis an anathema. Moreover, the author’s heavy dependence on psychoanalytic writings will no doubt put off those who dislike such works. (Whether these potential readers do so for scientific or ideological reasons hardly matters; they’re not likely to read the book anyway.)

Other readers, however, will be well-rewarded for considering Holbrook’s arguments. They are perhaps most rewarding for those of us who loved the sixties (hey, they sure were fun and we sure were young).

Holbrook’s empirical material, much of it from Scandinavia, is powerful in its demonstration of the way in which sexual objects can become a nearly all-pervasive reality that undercuts and replaces subtler bonds of affection, compassion, and love. The Scandinavia of 1972 must have been quite shocking to an English gentleman, and Holbrook persuades that the English gentleman was right. Today it seems less astonishing, but that may be a measure of its pervasiveness and the degree to which we have come to accept it.
Next time your kid is home from school with the sniffles, watch with him the soap opera he would be watching anyway. It is simply astonishing how much active sexuality is shown even in the afternoon. This may not be the Armageddon that Holbrook believes it to be, but he certainly convinces that it is strongly related to many changes in society that no one finds desirable. Most of this book demonstrates not only the pervasiveness of sex, but the pervasiveness of the more unwholesome varieties of sex.

Many readers will, however, justifiably object to Professor Holbrook’s chapter on homosexuality. The objection will be justifiable not because the analysis is Freudian, but because it gives too short shrift to the likely role of physiological causal factors (probably heredity) in the etiology of homosexuality. This all takes a bit of explaining.

Those who would dismiss the Freudian view of male homosexuality nearly always see homosexuality as physiologically caused. (The “physiology” is usually seen as hereditary, though some see fetal environment effecting a neurological change.) While rarely examining the causal development further, they implicitly equate “physiologically-caused” with “physiologically determined” (i.e., necessary and sufficient to alone cause homosexuality). We know that this is almost certainly incorrect.

It is almost certainly incorrect because half of the identical twin brothers of homosexuals are not homosexual. It is very difficult to explain this in purely hereditary terms (though it is possible, but extremely unlikely, that this could be a result of penetrance, a probabilistic process that can affect one identical twin, but not the other).

Thus, in all likelihood whatever the causal physiological factors, these factors must be complemented by some environmental factor(s). In other words, homosexuality is in all likelihood, a multi-step process. If the physiological factor is not present, the individual will not become homosexual. If it is present and is not complemented by a (necessary) environmental factor, the individual will not become homosexual. But, if both factors are present, the individual will become homosexual. (To be sure, this schematic makes absolute what is probably probabilistic: “necessary causes” are probably “powerful facilitators”. But the point remains the same.)

Now, once the environmental factor is seen as necessary for the development of homosexuality, the Freudian view is back in the game. (If physiology were determinative, of course, the Freudian explanation, and all environmental explanations, would be unnecessary.)

This does not, of course, demonstrate the correctness of the Freudian view. That is not my point here. Here, I make the point merely that the Freudian can