

Virtually undetectable

The Andrew Sullivan phenomenon

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Andrew Sullivan sprang into prominence in the early 1990s when he came out as a gay man while editing the right-wing American weekly magazine *The New Republic*. In *Virtually Normal* (1995) he reviewed prohibitionist, liberationist, conservative and liberal ideas about homosexuality and society.* He concluded that homosexuals can't help it and therefore cannot be blamed, and that the state should therefore 'enshrine formal public equality' for gays, as for all citizens. This would include most of the usual rights package – an equal age of consent; recognition in sex-education classes; anti-discrimination legislation for the workplace, including the military; legal marriage. The question is, why should the restatement of a programme that is already so widely conceded among the intelligentsia be excerpted in the *Guardian*, reviewed everywhere, and become a best-seller?

In his new book, *Love Undetectable*, writing now as an HIV-positive gay man, Sullivan leads with a proclamation that the AIDS emergency is over.** By this, he does not mean that only people in wealthy countries count, or only gay men, or that combination therapies work for everyone or will work indefinitely. Nonetheless, the grim inevitability of the illnesses and deaths of AIDS-related conditions does not hang over the gay population in the way that it did. Combination therapies can reduce the viral load to a point where it is 'undetectable'. We still have a disease, but we don't have a plague.

This is a fair analysis. However, Sullivan presents the change rhapsodically, alongside emotive accounts of the deaths of friends in what seems like the old days. The tendency must be to encourage people to relax the precautions that we call 'safer sex'. However, HIV is as infectious as ever, and combination therapies are difficult to maintain, have substantial side-effects for many users, and appear not to work in about a third of cases. In my judgement, Sullivan's stance is irresponsible.

In saying this, I am aware of another danger: that gay men, and activists and intellectuals in particular, may hanker after the epidemic as a time of solidarity when we knew who we were and where we stood. As Sullivan says, there are other important issues. In his view they amount to a simple question: whether gay men are 'prepared to choose further integration', or are 'poised to leap into another spasm of libidinal pathology'. He offers these alternatives bluntly, as getting married versus spending the night at a sexy disco.

* Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality*, 2nd edn, Picador, London, 1996.

**Andrew Sullivan, *Love Undetectable: Reflections on Friendship, Sex and Survival*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1998.

All right now?

Now, how far lesbians and gay men can now safely merge into the mainstream, and how far they would be wiser to retain the protection and resources of distinctive subcultures, is widely discussed in gay magazines and books (Sullivan mentions none of this). It has occurred to many of us that the alternatives need not be so stark – few people suggest that the ending of discrimination against people of colour should involve the abandonment of cultural difference. Sullivan not only obscures such possibilities; he threatens gays who don't want to sign up to such a fading institution as marriage with a new stigmatization – we are exhibiting 'another spasm of libidinal pathology'.

Sullivan does not flinch from the thought that his stance derives from a Roman Catholic upbringing which left him guilty, self-hating and reluctant to acknowledge that gay subculture might be where he belonged. Before AIDS, he says, 'although I had carefully denied it, I had quietly distanced myself from much of what I thought of as "gay culture"'. The terrors of the epidemic drew him in after all. But now, he hopes, it is over and he can 'live a normal life'. He thinks the scope for this has actually been enlarged by AIDS, because the epidemic forced 'America' to decide whether it would recognize or abandon gay men, and on the whole it opted for the former. 'The humanity slowly trumped the difference.' To say the least, this is an unusual idea.

It is our normality, Sullivan believes, that is going to secure our rights: gays no longer appear to be saying 'Let us in' – we are already inside. Clinton's 'don't ask, don't tell' policy was a triumph because it acknowledged this. And hence Sullivan's title, 'virtually normal': gays are already living like other people, so society cannot long persist in discrimination which is manifestly unreasonable. This is another unusual idea (if it were well founded, our societies would surely be very different).

Sullivan's books are received with accolades because he is telling many gay and straight people what they would like to believe: that everything is all right now. AIDS is over and civil rights are just around the corner. Lesbians and gay men just have to be themselves, quietly, in personal and work contexts; there is no call for campaigning or for a distinctive subculture. From the mainstream point of view, correspondingly, accommodating us will be painless: nobody needs to think about anything new, nobody needs to change. As the opponents of his position, Sullivan produces some straw people called 'gay liberationists'; they have been promoting indiscriminate promiscuity for 'at least two generations'; they are as extreme and dangerous as Christians who condemn all gay sexual expression.

I am getting very tired of people pronouncing on Gay Liberation who weren't there and who don't read our history. The term was introduced to identify and promote a conceptual shift that occurred around 1970. It was: that gay people should develop the confidence not to pretend, to others and perhaps to themselves, that they are heterosexual. This did not open the way to lots of anonymous sex. Gay men already had that – look at the lavish cruising routines of Tom Driberg, Michael Davidson and Joe Orton. Gay Liberation supports the idea that you don't have to marry; you can live with your partner without pretending that one of you is a manservant or a secretary. It encourages having it recognized that you are gay, in spite of the risk of getting attacked, thrown out of your accommodation or held back in your job. It strengthens the conditions for public meeting places where we can socialize and meet partners. In so far as we have gained a degree of social and legal endorsement for this project, it is not because we have tried to be inconspicuous and to go it alone, as people did before Gay Liberation and as Sullivan proposes now.

Beyond that conceptual shift, we have been debating what to do with our (relative) liberation. Some men have indeed held that, since having sex is what the system has tried to stop us doing, the more sex we have the more we assert our gayness. But others have disputed this. Among the published interventions we may note the fiction of Larry



Kramer, Harvey Fierstein, Armistead Maupin, David Leavitt and Tony Kushner, all of whom are mistrustful of the bar and disco scene and approving of lasting relationships. Andrew Holleran exhibits disco culture, but surely with more than enough Catholic self-hatred. All these writers are contributing to gay understanding of how liberation might best be cultivated. Sullivan mentions none of them, so dismissive is he of gay subculture.

Equally bizarrely, Sullivan reasserts in *Love Undetectable* the claim which he makes in *Virtually Normal*, that promiscuity is encouraged by constructionist theory (which holds that our concepts of sexuality are historically organized, not essential, universal or natural). Constructionism is indeed a prominent academic theory, but most gay men, activists included, believe themselves to have been born gay, and that they are validated by the precedents of Socrates, Michelangelo, Tchaikovsky, and so on. In so far as they have multiple partners, constructionism has nothing to do with it. Further, constructionism does not mean, as Sullivan supposes, that there is no such thing as a homosexual, that sex is beyond good and evil, that human freedom flourishes best in the absence of all restrictions, or that people are not responsible for their actions. Nor can the work of Michel Foucault be reasonably associated with a utopian overthrow of restraints; Foucault explicitly opposes Herbert Marcuse's advocacy of a 'great refusal'.

The most enlightening parts of Sullivan's books are his tussles with right-wingers. He engages with crude versions of natural law and evolutionary psychology, entertains the thought that AIDS was a judgement from God or nature, and ends up looking for friendship with God. Who else is going to revisit the biblical prohibitions, comparing them with Aquinas and with recent papal manoeuvrings? Who else is going to dispute solemnly with psychoanalysts, such as the notorious Charles Socarides, who say they can cure homosexuals? Sullivan handles all this with considerable shrewdness, though at the cost of giving credence to reactionary ideas by accepting them onto the intellectual agenda.

Real men do it with each other

Sullivan's ultimate project goes virtually unavowed. It is male chauvinism. From evolutionary psychology he derives the thought that male gay promiscuity is no more than typical of men, who meet evolutionary imperatives when they scatter their seed as

widely as possible. Lesbians, correspondingly, are said to indulge in nest-making, as evolution requires of women. Thus Sullivan is able to declare gay behaviour not just normal, but masculine. And that makes him happy.

The persistent anxiety of gay men is that we are effeminate. But not Sullivan. He is not insecure about this; he never wanted 'to gain masculinity by somehow absorbing the maleness of others', or to be feminine – though when he avoided team sports at school a girl did ask him 'Are you sure you're not really a girl under there?' Sissy boys are a problem, though. It is they who vindicate right-wingers, suffer identity conflict, and provoke explanations from psychologists. Fortunately, as Sullivan sees it, gendered roles are becoming less important among gays: 'sexual roles have become more fluid as homosexuality has become more accepted, and as masculinity has ceased to be understood as somehow contradictory to homosexuality but as compatible with it' (few of Sullivan's sentences are as awkwardly written as that one). So we can all be butch after all. We can 'reclaim our gender from the people who would deny it to us, including ourselves'. Even the men in the disco are on the right track, in so far as they are exhibiting 'raw male sexuality distilled, of a kind that unites straight and gay men and separates them from women'. However, once again, this celebration of masculinity involves stigmatizing gays who can't or won't normalize themselves. They are put down as 'prone to adult dysfunction and pathology', as 'insecure gay adults' who 'will always cling, to a greater or lesser extent, to the protections of gender mannerisms'.

It is perfectly understandable that Sullivan's urge to be normal should include wanting to believe that AIDS and its stigma are over, though his haste is probably dangerous. But it also includes repudiating the stigma of the feminine. This is a high price to pay for normality: most of our history, many of our number, personal and political alliances with women.

The last part of *Love Undetectable* is an essay on friendship, and this too turns out to be one for the lads. Sullivan finds that friendship is 'more common and more natural between members of the same gender' and that, although it is incompatible with sexual relations, gays are particularly good at it. Indeed, one benefit from the merging of gay men back into mainstream society which Sullivan envisages is that we can help straight men to achieve 'male intimacy' and 'social belonging among men'. Observe, though, that a general cultivation of friendship is not the point. Sullivan is not interested in friendships between women and men, or between lesbians and gay men; according to his biologicistic notions, lesbian culture is always likely to be 'estranged from gay male culture'. What he wants for gays is the company of straight men. Even if we can't fuck with them, they must be better than those feminine creatures – women and gay men. No wonder Sullivan wants to assimilate. Anything rather than being stuck with those dreadful homosexuals.