

Samuel Rawet's *Homossexualismo: Sexualidade e Valor* (1970): A Founding Text of Brazilian Queer Theorizing

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Abstract

Samuel Rawet (1929-84) is considered one of Brazil's leading narrators regarding the complexities of Jewish immigration to that country: Contos do imigrante (1960) is a classic of Jewish-Brazilian writing. Virtually known is Rawet's essay Homossexualismo: Sexualidade e Valor (1970) in defense of homosexuality, which he published as an obscure pamphlet during the military dictatorship; it has recently been made available anew in a collection of his complete essays (2008), where it is the lead text. This document, which is one of the first treatises in Spanish or Portuguese sympathetic to homoaffectivity (thereby superseding a long Latin American tradition of denunciatory writing in defense of morals and public hygiene), goes against the grain of contemporary "sympathetic" writings, subscribing neither to the theory of minority identity nor to the theory of regrettable harmonal/psychological imbalance. Rather, Rawet subscribes adamantly to an existential premise that homoaffectivity is a deliberate and conscious personal life-shaping choice, and it must be defended on those grounds alone. In this sense, it is one of the most original essays in Latin America on the subject of sexuality.

Key words: *homosexuality; existential philosophy; Samuel Rawet; sexual ideology*

"[...] a consideração de homem como estrutura aberta, sem começo nem fim, uma definição do ato de pensar como ato de deslocar, *daqui* para *aqui* mesmo, e da transcendência compreendida como um movimento do ato de pensar, movimento que conduz de um pensamento a outro, após o nada do intervalo, foi com esses elementos que dei início ao trabalho." (Rawet 28)

Most known for his highly elaborated short fiction about Jewish diaspora life in Brazil, often with a prophetic or apocalyptic twist, Rawet (1929-84) also wrote important essays on religious philosophy. However, his long essay *Homossexualismo: Sexualidade e Valor* (1970) stands out both because it was published as an independent pamphlet and because of the way in which he addresses queer issues that were only beginning to crystallize in Western sociopolitical thought (one recalls that it was not until 1976 that Foucault published the first volume of *The History of Homosexuality*); Rawet's essay appeared at a time when in the West, both the right and the left denounced so-called homosexuality (the right as fire and brimstone-deserving sin; the left as the epitome of bourgeois decadence of rotten moral fiber). Rawet's essay, which bears unmistakable traces of his convoluted prose, is an important founding text in what today we would call the bibliography of Brazilian queer theorizing. As such, it appears before other similar texts in other Latin American societies and joins Adolfo Caminha's *Bom-Crioulo* (1895), the founding Latin American gay novel, in framing a significant Brazilian attention to the queer turn. Although Rawet's essay has been routinely ignored by scholars of Brazilian queer culture (Lopes,¹ MacRae, Trevisan, Parker, Green), it begs for attention as not only the articulation of a strong position on queer matters, but as a singularly personal text signed by a Jew very much involved with issues of marginalization and exile who also lived an openly marked queer life.

Rawet's *Homossexualismo*, while it does not mention Sartre and directly evokes the word *existencialista* only once in its twenty pages ("*existencial* [ai, a palavra!]" [34]), is very much committed to what we can call a clearly crucial estimation of the matter. One of the grounding ideological principles of Rawet's text is the insistently reiterated principle (significantly stated with capital letters) that "O HOMEM ESCOLHE A FORMA DA SUA SEXUALIDADE" (28, 35) and that "a ambigüidade ainda flutua na consideração de que ser como natureza sob a forma de homem é ser *eticamente*, e ser homem sob forma de natureza é ser *valor*" (29). In this sense, then, Rawet comes down categorically on the side of how the sexual life of individuals is part of the vast enterprise of becoming that is part of their legacy as human subjects in a hostile universe in which they, and they alone, must decide how to survive ethically (Rawet makes it clear that he is speaking of "O Homem, com H maiúsculo, sempre" [21] while also making it abundantly clear that *Homem* here is anything but an exclusionary sexist designation).

As such, then, Rawet positions himself in radical opposition to prevalent and emerging concepts of homosexuality of fifty years ago (the reason for which I will employ strategically a term that is normally not part of my theoretical vocabulary). While Rawet's position regarding the sexuality of the individual as the consequence of absolutely valorous personal decisions, as it must be under the aegis of the standard version of existentialism, one must recognize that the latter did not normally dwell in its formulations on the freedoms of choice with regard to sexuality, perhaps believing that antecedent anarchistic formulations of the principles of free love might continue to prevail adequately, which in turn feeds into a certain modernist proposition of gayness as a mark of

¹ Lopes does mention one of Rawet's stories, stating that the author deserves further study (134), but he makes no mention of the 1970 essay on homosexuality.

privilege and favor (Cocteau and company, for example). The seven hundred pages of Sartre's *Saint Genet* inevitably must take note of what one might choose to characterize as Genet's ground-zero sexual anarchy or his commitment to the unrestrained release of sexual energy as part of the individual's existential self-construction (both principles anchored in Genet's sexual Everyman, Querelle), but one looks in vain for any extended meditation on Sartre's part as regards the exemplary importance of Genet in terms of sexuality in general or homosexuality specifically² (regarding homosexuals as, however, an important category of the other for Sartre, see Charmé 258-60).

Certainly, it would be fair to say that the emergent discourse of the defense of homosexuality—the defense of its existence, the defense of the dignity of those to whom it is ascribed, the defense of the legitimacy to act on homosexual desire—is not grounded in the unfettered right of individuals to pursue their sexual pulsions. At the time Rawet wrote his essay—recall that it was published as a pamphlet in 1970—homosexuality was still the love that dared not speak its name (i.e., could not speak for itself in its own right), being rather the alleged non-love that the state continued to pathologize and criminalize, in concert with various projects to lead to its eradication. This was as much true in Rawet's Brazil as it was in Gore Vidal's, James Baldwin's, and John Rechy's United States (to refer to the three American novelists who first penned openly gay novels in 1948, 1956, and 1963 respectively).³ The essentialist ideas of homoerotic desire as a psychological impairment (I always have rather liked the outrageous proposition that homosexuality is a "mistake" of nature, even of God Himself), as the mark of Cain (naturalism's drunkenness and other bad genes updated), or as a perversely enacted defiance of God's will (but against which commandment does it transgress?). Actually, of course, the idea of transgressive sex (i.e., anything other than compulsory patriarchal heteronormativity) as an act of defiance meets with the existentialist criterion of absolute free will, but it is characterized (recall that it is not speaking in its own name) always as a destructive undertaking, never a valorous one.

The emergent discourse of the revolutionary subject (not itself without a deep current of homophobia, as one will recall vis-à-vis the manly heteronormative values defended so stridently and even so violently by Che Guevara) had yet really to incorporate sexual liberation into its ideology (as the Montoneros in Argentina in the 1960s were wont to chant, "No somos putos, no somos faloperos / somos soldados de Evita y montoneros" [*falopero*=tomadores de drogas]), and

² Sartre does rather fumble around for an explanation of Genet's homosexuality, suggesting that it was a choice he deliberately made to affirm his social marginalization as the consequence of his youthful run-ins with the law (90-91). In this, he even goes so far as to contradict Genet's own assertion that his homosexual feelings, at the age of ten, antedate his career as a thief. Although this is hardly an adequately understanding of even how homosexuality might be a freely-determined choice, it does, in its own way, parallel Rawet's idea of homosexuality as an existential choice. If Rawet had read Sartre's long essay on Genet, which was originally published in 1952, he makes no mention of it.

³ *The City and the Pillar; Giovanni's Room; The City of Night*. It is important to keep in mind that of these three founding American gay novels, two are signed by men of color (Baldwin, African American; Rechy Mexican American).

when what we can synthetically call the hippy practice of free love do emerge, they are still a long way from embracing homoaffectivity and homoerotic desire.

Both in the United States and in Brazil, the struggle for the recognition of gay rights is, as we all know, a long one (and a risky one, especially when one considers what happens when the cluster LBGTQ becomes homonormative). There are significant structural differences between the two societies, while both consider homosexuality a psychological curse, Brazil sanctions only the public display of homosexuality, under the aegis of decency laws, while the United States sanctions both public display and so-called deviant private consenting acts, routinely engaging in the semantic chaining of assuming, without either proof or anyone offering an effective counterdiscourse, that public display necessarily, inevitably meant accompanying deviant private acts. A central component of the gay rights struggle has been the almost universal commitment (whether mainly strategic or firmly held as a conviction) that being gay is part of individuals' hardwiring for which they, therefore, cannot be held morally responsible; the evocation of statistics that confirm contemptable patterns of biodiversity have often been confirmed by reference to homosexuality as akin to a handicap, something for which society must make accommodations as much as it does for the blind and the halt. So-called crip theory works very much off of this base (McRuer), and it seems to have been, politically, a very effective discourse. The idea that so-called homosexuality is a hard-wired component of certain social subjects is a crucial part of the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in Brazil (as elsewhere in Latin America, as an integral component of the ideology of the New Left) and unquestionably it is a solid pillar of the defense of the legitimacy of gay marriage in the United States (as it was in Argentina, which has led in the Americas the way on a national scale in 2010). One is gay like one is blind. Accommodate and move on ("E durma-se!" Rawet says [31]).

But all of this human rights discourse and appeal to the rights of the handicapped can have no appeal for Rawet, quite aside from the circumstantial fact that it is part of post-World War II society in the United States with nothing to do with the political forces of Brazil at the time. I do not know if Rawet would have been put off by the human rights/handicapped formulation of homosexuality, but it would have constituted an unbreachable departure from the existentialist base of his formulations. It is basically quite irrelevant that Rawet's actual examples of homosexuality are rather thin or incomplete by today's standards of knowledge as regards the queer sexual potential of the human body. Rawet remained rather firmly tied to what were known as inversionist principles of deviant sexuality: the man who wishes to take the role of the woman, the woman who wishes to take the role of the man, all grounded in the confusing active/passive dichotomy that has little investment in the actual and profound comportment of sexual subjects in erotic conjunction with each other.

Charles Silverstein and Edmund White will not publish *The Joys of Gay Sex* until 1977 (see the Brazilian spin-off, the Portuguese translations of the Americans Alicia Gallotti's and Rafael Ruiz's *Kama sutra gay* [2005]), and one can simply say that Rawet takes into account what was part of the public discourse at the time regarding homosexuality: the inversion of sexual desire in social subjects who are, nevertheless, still securely grounded in the sexist binary of biological sex and the

social categories of feminine and masculine being in the world, psychological configuration, and sexual theatrics derived from that biological binary. As a consequence, for example, for Rawet it is necessary to make much of anal stimulation as a necessary component of gay male sexual climax because of the all-determining displacement of the female vagina to the male anus. Concomitantly, as much as he is opposed to schematic views of human behavior, he cannot go beyond summarizing human sexual behavior in a pronouncedly mechanistic sense:

E para sermos breves resumiremos sexualidade em:

Exitação

penetração ativa ou passiva

ejaculação ou orgasmo, ou ambos

presença de três consciências, *eu-tu-ele*. (36)

What is not irrelevant, however, is how Rawet's conviction that human sexuality is an imperious component of the exercise of absolute human existential freedom, whereby, then, whatever any sexuality one could contemplate (today, we would have the frame of consent and nonexploitation, of course) is a valid undertaking in the construction of one's place in the universe. This formulation has two sides to it. One is the rejection of the hegemonic sexologist beliefs, whether medical or more specifically psychiatric, that the individual social subject is a closed system. From a Freudian point of view, that system can be analyzed and reconstructed, toward a putatively healthier mental life (even when Freud ultimately defends homosexuality and argues that it is something one might live happily with). The point is, unquestionably, that one is not condemned to being what one is:

Em todos os ensaios, todos, que encontrei sobre a sexualidade, um ponto sempre me pareceu falho: o caráter definido, *totalizado*, inmutável, o caráter *absoluto* de homem como ser, mais inmutável do que a eternidade. (30)

He goes on to reject any generalizing of the "ponto de transformar o indivíduo em sistema fechado, portador de potencialidades definitivas" (31), and he states flatly "Odeio a sistematização" (36).

As a novelistic narrator, Rawet speaks of his own experiences in the Rio de Janeiro sexual underworld (a characterization that underscores the matter of public decency mentioned above), and one of the most charming narrative components of *Homossexualismo* is the defense of the man who hawks, going from one bar to the other, examples of yellow journalism, one of whose mainstays is sexual transgression and scandal. Rawet's admiration for such publications, and for the social benefits of the hawker, is immediately evident: this is the real stuff of actual human sexual life. Why might one attend to the rigid classifications of sterile scientific formulations that have little to do with the down-and-dirty realities of the human body, when, for a few cents, one can savor in lurid detail, perhaps even with equally delightful lurid images, the flesh incarnate of lived human sexuality, including, to be sure, the best scandal of all for the money, homosexuality:

Guardo o nome do vendedor de jornais: Elias Gomes. É bem mais importante do que muita besta erudita. É mais importante que qualquer filósofo. Muito mais importante que teorias confusas claramente expostas, e *definitivas*. Não é bom o *calor da vida* que ele comunica, isto é lugar-comum de sublitteratura barata, esquema lógico fornecido pronto para uma estética de quinta classe para homens da mesa. O que ele comunica é uma *fratura*, uma *abertura*, com a grandeza e o humor do que dominam a ambigüidade das palavras e com a generosidade dos que não se sentem obrigados a se horrorizar com o horror, obrigação a mascarar um sentimento hipócrita e a impedir o *horror do horror autêntico*. Elias Gomes tem nome de profeta [...] (40-41)

This is an absolutely delightful formulation of the value of marginal social discourse—and for the value of recovering and showcasing it—as a strategy of contestational and transgressive thinking that can offer the hope of perceiving how the sexual life of social subjects actually works and how it can, how it must, be crucial to the ethical construction of existential subjectivity. Significantly dissonant with prevailing sexual ideologies of the day, Rawet’s formulations get lost, so to speak, in the shuffle. However, today it is imperative to recover them and to understand how on target they may be for the assertion of queer individual sexual subjectivity as part of, at least, the so-called Pink Tide that is going on in Latin America⁴ and that is accompanied by the recognition of what we continue to call, rather incompletely, gay lesbian and gay rights. Part of the rhetorical interest of Rawet’s essay is this appeal to personal experience and to the virtually mythical figure of the scandal sheet hawker, all couched in recurrent topoi of intellectual modesty as regards Rawet’s knowledge of the theories of the sexologists and even the Latin to which they have frequent recourse in order not to really call things by their proper names in the vernacular of living sociosexual subjects.

I do not know if it is really appropriate to characterize Rawet’s essay as apocalyptic in the terms in which Lindstrom has discussed his fictional writing, although it is clear that he is deeply committed to repudiating prevailing beliefs and values with regard to sexual ethics and, therefore, as deeply committed to a radical restructuring of what those ethics might look like. In line with the personalist rhetoric of *Homossexualismo*, Rawet picks up on the central issues of immigration and exile that dominate in this fictional writing:

E os valores do cotidiano têm que ser reconquistados sempre. São valores próprios, mesmo que idênticos aos adotados. Somos todos estrangeiros em nossa casa. Todos emigrantes e imigrantes, *daqui para aqui* mesmo. A *personagem* que cada um é representa uma conquista necessária. Conquista individual e social. Cada um representa alguma coisa. Só de um *ato livre* nasce realmente un *relação humana*. (48)

⁴ And as showcased in the Symposium: Latin America Pink Tide, held at the University of Pittsburgh, November 14-15, 2014.

These are, we might agree, proposals that are totally consonant with the current Pink Tide in Latin America, even when its proponents may not have sociosexual subjectivity in mind. Yet the writing of this subjectivity, when it can be accomplished in an adequate fashion, will have Rawet's essay as a major bibliographic anchor.

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