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The Conflicted Gay Pioneer

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By Rick Valelly

October 8, 2013



When it comes to American political thought, who in our nation's history did the thinking and writing that we ought to care about? The Puritans, for starters. They created a theocracy in a strange land and the idea of American exceptionalism. The Founders invented a new democratic form of government, wrote its charters—the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights—and explained the logics of its nascent institutions. The argument about whether and how to remain true to these texts has unfolded ever since, with contributions from Abraham Lincoln to Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan to today. Because the Founders built a new government on a narrow social base of slave owners and propertied white men, significant political thought must also include the works of abolitionists and champions of blacks', women's, immigrants' rights—everyone who persuaded Americans to update and expand what was meant by "We the People."

In the wake of our country's enormous gains in gay rights, it's time to think about which advocate for gay rights should enter the canon. The first candidate seems clear: Frank Kameny has been called the movement's Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, and Martin Luther King Jr. rolled into one. In 1957, the government fired him from his job as an astronomer (on a technicality but with the underlying reason understood to be sexual orientation). In 1961, Kameny filed a famously eloquent brief to the Supreme Court basing his right to work on the Declaration of Independence. In 1965, he helped organize the first gay protest outside the White House, seeking civil-service protection. By the early 1970s, he was leading a broader fight to destigmatize homosexuality.

Kameny didn't arrive until the 1960s, though. What about his predecessors? The recent re-issue of a biographical sketch by historian Martin Duberman reminds us of a nearly forgotten but fascinating figure, Donald Webster Cory, the author of a pioneering Cold War–era work on gays in America: *The Homosexual in America* (1951). For a time, Cory became the theorist of the early gay-rights activists of the 1950s and early 1960s, in somewhat the same way that historian C. Vann Woodward's 1955 classic, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, was read and circulated among black civil-rights groups as they strategized and acted in the civil-rights movement's early years.

The case for Cory is richly ambiguous, though. Cory was the pseudonym for Edward Sagarin, whose name still stirs unease. A decade and a half after his pathbreaking 1951 contribution, Sagarin began to insist, as a tenured sociologist at John Jay College of Criminal Justice specializing in the study of "deviance," on pathologizing homosexuality. Any accounting of Cory's impact must reckon with Sagarin—both the life that he led and the odyssey that caused him to depart from his initial convictions. The cultural conservatism that he eventually espoused has had the effect of cloaking the power and force of his first book under his pseudonym. Edward Sagarin's professional career eventually placed grenades around Donald Webster Cory's underappreciated legacy.

Yet rereading *The Homosexual in America*, one realizes that this is a good moment to revisit its prophetic element. The fullest biography of Sagarin that we have is the above-mentioned sketch, first published in 1997 in *The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review*, now reissued in *The Martin Duberman Reader: The Essential Historical, Biographical, and Autobiographical Writings*. This collection spans Duberman's career as an essayist, memoirist, playwright, historian of abolition and gay radicalism, and provocative public intellectual based at the City University of New York.

Duberman interviewed Sagarin's wife and contemporaries, read his correspondence and researched his political activity, and unearthed a welter of evocative details. Sagarin was one of eight children born to a family of Russian Jewish immigrants in Schenectady, New York, in 1913. The family moved to New York City after the early death of his mother, and by the early 1930s, amid the Great Depression and what would be lifelong health issues, he dropped out of City College of New York. He spent a year in France, where he met the writer André Gide, a personal hero whose defense of homosexuality, *Corydon*, was—with the spelling rearranged—to inspire his pseudonym. Sagarin briefly went to Alabama to be one of the agitators on hand at the trial of the Scottsboro Boys. Later, he found a niche ghostwriting and editing European correspondence for a cosmetics firm, becoming along the way a salesman and an expert on the science of perfume. He married a woman sympathetic to his politics, but he appears to have led, from the beginning, a parallel, sexually active gay life—open enough in gay company but closeted to the world outside.

By 1948, along with countless other Americans, Sagarin would have been reading the blockbuster report of Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. Kinsey's report was part of a midcentury American explosion of interest and change in sexuality, sexual practice,

and gender roles. Among other topics Kinsey opened up to a wide readership was the question of homosexuality, which the author suggested was natural and common, in both fantasy and practice.

Before the postwar era, no organized gay or lesbian civil-rights groups or associations had existed in the U.S. beyond a tiny, short-lived group in Chicago founded in the 1920s by Henry Gerber, a postal worker who lost his job as a result. Fledgling gay and lesbian enclaves-and cultural and social visibility, especially in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C.-had emerged and quietly were beginning to thrive in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Gays and lesbians served in large numbers in World War II and were treated with a mixture of contempt and, in some quarters, a surprising degree of acceptance; according to historian Allan Bérubé, military psychiatrists advised top brass on how to accommodate them.

This entente collapsed in the late 1940s, when the federal government became deeply and officially homophobic. The Veterans Administration denied GI Bill benefits to gay veterans. The newly consolidated Defense Department announced that homosexuals and lesbians must be discharged as rapidly as possible from the armed forces. The Senate launched an extensive closed-door investigation in the summer of 1950 that led to the publication of a special report, "Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government"-an excerpt of which Cory would include in an appendix to his book.

The Senate report called for the investigation and dismissal of all homosexuals and lesbians. In a phrase that is well known among LGBT historians, the report stated: "One homosexual can pollute a government office." In the ensuing years, thousands lost their jobs, and many committed suicide. One man who was booted from the State Department shot himself on the street in Washington, D.C., right after he left work.

With *The Homosexual in America*, Cory offered an intellectual response to the government's mailed fist-to the climate that fostered lurid speculations in the halls of Congress that homosexuals were likely to be Communists (and vice versa), and to stepped-up police raids on gay and lesbian bars. In his preface, Cory explained that it was time for someone who was homosexual to write about what it was like to be homosexual in America.

Cory opened the book by declaring that "minority rights" are the "challenge of this century ... the corner stone upon which democracy must build and flourish, or perish in the decades to come." Homosexuals were, he claimed, a "group without a spokesman, without a leader, without a publication, without an organization, without a philosophy of life, without an accepted justification for its own existence." This was incorrect; the groundbreaking homophile organization the Mattachine Society had recently been founded in Los Angeles by Harry Hay. But Cory clearly thought that he was providing a manifesto.

Cory identified-and then dismantled-the primary justifications for homophobia, all of which are cited by those who still oppose gay rights. Same-sex attraction is contrary to nature (if that's true, then why has it always existed?); condemnation is essential for a strong society (the strongest society is one unafraid of basic social facts); civilization will fail to reproduce itself if it encourages homosexuality (the demographic explosion of the 20th century suggests that civilization is safe); and homosexuals are moral outlaws ("Much of the sordid character of the lives of some homosexuals is due to the social attitudes of which they are the victims," Cory writes. "The dominant group creates a vicious circle, in which inequality is forced upon a minority, and the conditions resulting from inequality are then cited as justification of the unequal status").

This idea of a vicious circle is the first of Cory's insights that raise the book to the level of democratic theory. He identifies a social cage for gays, one built on straight supremacy (though he does not use that term) and on stereotype--confirming dominance. Cory's second insight is that gays have established their own social institutions and practices-house parties, bars, drag balls-that provide informal, largely hidden safe havens in a hostile world. The subtext is clear and startling: America is a kind of straight police state, with an underground resistance.

His chapter "The Society We Envisage" leads off with the question "What does the homosexual want?" The problem, Cory says, is that the question has no answer because no freedom of political expression exists for gays, and gays have no institutional contexts in which to resolve their inevitable differences about what to do. Citing a proverbial sociologist's quip that there are no minority problems, only majority problems, Cory points more than once in his book to the all-encompassing, suffocating nature of homophobia (a term that would not be invented until the late 1960s). If gays speak out or identify themselves, they pay steep personal costs, including blacklisting in the labor market. Most straights have no interest in changing the status quo. It is all too possible for gay men to pass as straight: "The inherent tragedy-not the saving grace-of homosexuality is found in the ease of concealment. If the homosexual were as readily recognizable as are members of ... other minority groups, the social condemnation could not possibly exist ... our achievements in society and our contributions ... would become well-known, and not merely the arsenal of argument in the knowledge of a few."

The solution was as simple as it was difficult. Gay men and women would have to speak for themselves. Break the societal hush. Continue to talk freely and talk yet more after the silence is broken. Social change through discussion would transform the civic status of homosexuals. More than that, it would enlighten all of society. This general public enlightenment would paradoxically take place in private lives: If "sexual freedom" truly existed, the intimate lives of heterosexuals would become far more open as well. Here it takes an effort to realize that in 1951 some of what heterosexual couples do, like oral and anal sex, was illegal (though it is quite doubtful that the law deterred anybody).

Particularly interesting is Cory's insistence that if the social silence were broken, then American democracy would no longer be crippled by its unwitting resemblance to fascism and totalitarianism. "At this moment in history, when the forces of totalitarianism seek to extend the conspiracy of silence and the distortions of truth to all phases of life-to science and politics and human relations-the homosexuals ... are seeking to extend freedom of the individual, of speech, press, and thought to an entirely new realm."

Cory's discussion of gay emancipation in the Cold War context was, for its time, breathtaking. America's political, military, and national-security elites had taken the position that homosexuality was liberal democracy's weak link. Without evidence, they argued that gay men and women in public service were security risks, in government or in defense-related manufacturing, because they were subject to blackmail.

Cory held that liberal democracy would be made safer if the coils of organized homophobia were unwound. Public debate would recognize that minorities and inassimilable differences are "a pillar of democratic strength. ... No force will be able to weave these groups into a single totalitarian unity which is the unanimity of the graveyard." Here Cory joins earlier prophets of cultural pluralism, such as Horace Kallen, and anticipates later theorists of multiculturalism, such as Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, and Will Kymlicka.

Beware: Reading Cory is not, alas, like reading a gay Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine. A lot of *The Homosexual in America* reads like a clunky version of a pop sociologist like Charles Murray, with references to "typical" figures who only have first names, such as Steve or Bernard. Scenes-such as party conversations-are re-created with cloying dialogue, in a corny "Inside Gay America" style. Cory has nothing to say about lesbians in the 1951 book and wrestles awkwardly with the question of how psychology explains homosexuality. Despite his view that psychiatry ought to foster self-acceptance instead of a cure, he accepts the determinist 1950s belief that an upbringing in a dysfunctional family causes homosexuality. Here is the seed of a different Cory-and ultimately, perhaps, of Edward Sagarin's alliance with more conservative psychologists in the 1970s.

The book was issued by the small publisher Greenberg. Sales figures and reviews are hard to come by, but its reception briefly led Sagarin to operate a gay-themed book club that may have helped build early connections in the movement. Cory received letters of appreciation from around the country. The African American magazine *Jet*, then just recently established, scoffed at the book. Norman Mailer, who reflected on his reaction for a homophile magazine in 1954, wrote that it was "hardly a great book" but "I can think of few books which cut so radically at my prejudices and altered my ideas so profoundly." Cory approached Alfred Kinsey for a foreword-a fascinating fact unearthed by the Canadian historian of psychology Henry Minton. Kinsey "enthusiastically approved" of Cory's work but declined the offer, perhaps figuring that he already had enough controversy on his hands. Most important, nearly all the early homophile leaders are known to have read and been influenced by it.

As Cory, Sagarin followed up with a 1953 edited anthology, *21 Variations on a Theme*, gathering fiction with gay and lesbian overtones by authors from Stefan Zweig to Sherwood Anderson. His later attempts at pop-expert social commentary never again struck the same nerve as *The Homosexual in America*. Professionally, meanwhile, he moved from perfume into a belated, prolific career in academic sociology, specializing in criminology, stigma, and deviance. On homosexuality, his views had begun to change. As an activist in the early 1960s, he tried and failed to guide the New York Mattachine Society toward an empathetic but conservative view that homosexuality is, whatever one wishes, not normal. In 1966, under his own name, he completed a dissertation about the group's New York chapter. Yet he used it to settle political scores with factional opponents who were committed to openly pressuring elected officials for better treatment. By the early 1970s, as the gay-rights movement was heading in a liberationist, assertive direction inspired by the symbolism of the Stonewall Rebellion, Sagarin had burned many bridges.

One can only speculate about the antagonisms. The psychologist who ended up writing the foreword to the 1951 edition of *The Homosexual in America* was Albert Ellis, the soon-to-be behavioral-therapy pioneer. Known for his liberal views on sex, he was nonetheless then still committed to the proposition that homosexuality required therapy; later, Ellis famously changed his mind, but Duberman thinks Sagarin may have been a patient. Sagarin's midlife metamorphosis into a credentialed expert may also have contributed to his estrangement from the cause of gay rights. In 1973, he wrote an essay for an academic journal denouncing the idea that gay men and women are healthy and asserting that they needed a "cure" because it is better to be heterosexual. By the late 1970s, he took same-sex orientation to be a "perversion of the instinctual drives" and recommended therapy. He died of a heart attack in 1986 at the age of 73.

In light of this history, one can see another irony, which has to do with Frank Kameny and his relationship to Cory's book. By the early 1960s, Kameny the emerging gay-rights leader clashed with an increasingly behind-the-times Cory. In his history of the movement, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, John D'Emilio quotes Kameny's harsh letter: "You have become no longer the vigorous Father of the Homophile Movement, to be revered, respected, and listened to, but the senile Grandfather of the Homophile Movement, to be humored and tolerated at best; to be ignored and disregarded usually; and to be ridiculed at worst." Kameny nonetheless remembered Cory's book as an important and essential text, which had helped to give him the courage that he showed later as an activist. Late in his life, Kameny was asked fancifully by an LGBT blog editor what favorite books he might have taken with him to the moon. Kameny replied that he would have taken two written works: the Declaration of Independence and Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America*.

Even as Cory/Sagarin embraced the "adjust your sick self" model of homosexual identity, Kameny identified this model as needing to be smashed. He set about doing just that. He organized disruptions at meetings of the American Psychiatric Association and called for

striking homosexuality as a disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the manual. A line runs through history, via Kameny, from Cory's 1951 book to this 1973 decision.

The moral of the story is that before protest and response came political thought: someone saying something new, in the face of heightened repression, about gays as a minority, and connecting their fate to that of American democracy. The first gay protests broke out into the open in Washington, D.C., and in Philadelphia in 1965, with pickets in front of the White House and the Civil Service Commission and in Independence Park. Conservatively dressed men and women carried signs challenging the federal government's exclusions. It was precisely these prohibitions- in the military or on any civil-service or private--sector job requiring a national-security clearance-that Cory had denounced in 1951. Cory had made himself marginal to the struggle. But the people who launched this brave public fight were well versed in his most liberated book.