

***Violence, Prejudice and Sexuality*, Stephen Tomsen, Routledge,
New York and London, 2009, 188 pages (ISBN 0-415-88655-4)**

Stephen Tomsen's book, *Violence, Prejudice and Sexuality*, engages with important questions about sexuality and anti-homosexual sentiment that criminologists have grappled with for some time. Tomsen's work refines these questions in the context of essentialism, and notes how this concept has enabled only very specific ways of thinking about and analysing violence, prejudice and sexuality. Indeed, thinking about the nexus between these three concepts is now almost taken for granted. As Tomsen demonstrates in his discussion of historical understandings of sexual desire, although social constructionism and queer perspectives have challenged essentialist notions of sexuality, research has, in many respects, upheld a binary understanding of heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal. Interestingly, essentialist binaries like this have been conveniently employed in more recent times when activists align with minority status in order to gain basic human rights. While no one could deny the importance of access to rights and justice, Tomsen notes the danger inherent in arguments like this that draw on essentialism. He argues that we are working through similar dichotomies of heterosexuality as normal and homosexuality as abnormal set up in very early research on sexual desire. The key difference now is that, in the rush towards public and political citizenship, 'heterosexuals are recast as "perpetrators" and homosexuals as "victims"' (Tomsen 2009:16). *Violence, Prejudice and Sexuality* importantly notes this is no less an essentialist dichotomy and no less divisive.

Sexual prejudice undoubtedly invokes the essentialist understanding of homosexuality as abnormal and heterosexuality as normal. Tomsen successfully argues that an equally essentialist response grounded in notions of homophobia is not without difficulties. He seeks not to undermine the concept of homophobia, but to point out the uncertainties involved in assuming an irrational fear of homosexuality and that this is a primary motivation for hate crimes. Homophobia, for instance, reclassifies heterosexuals as the 'ill' perpetrators of sexual prejudice, a label which has equally been applied to homosexuality in the past. Such labels, while again convenient, can gloss over the complexity of anti-homosexual violence and sentiment, in addition making it possible to lessen the culpability of an offender facing trial.

The complexity of sexual prejudice is well highlighted in empirical research that informs the book. Interviews and focus groups conducted with people in and around the context of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parades 2004–2007 demonstrate most people enjoyed the spectacle of transgressive sexualities in public spaces, but this enjoyment was sometimes coupled with masculine 'uneasiness about homosexual advances' (Tomsen 2009: 31) and disgust about masculine bodily integrity and homosexual sex. We see little evidence of homophobia here as a 'mental phobia that is unpleasant and troubling for sufferers' (Tomsen 2009:18). Rather, we see almost completely contradictory ideas of enjoyment and disgust held together in tension with one another in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Mardi Gras. Tomsen also demonstrates it is erroneous to assume that violent sexual prejudice is necessarily caused by homophobia as an irrational act of 'naked hatred'. His analysis of trial records, transcripts, statements, and final judgements pertaining to 74 anti-homosexual killings in New South Wales indicates how this violence, although at times frenzied, is no less rational than other forms of masculine violence, with perpetrators in Tomsen's research even assuming this violence would attract esteem amongst their peers. Perpetrators discussed openly their plans to "bait a poofster" (Tomsen 2009:80) providing apparent evidence of planning, rather than an impulsive attack incited by a deep-seated

homophobic response to a particular person. Tomsen's analysis of court transcripts employing homosexual advance defence equally challenges the usefulness of homophobia as an explanation for anti-homosexual violence. There is no question the attacks in these cases are frantically violent, but to assume they stem from homophobically-induced mania is to essentialise. It relies too heavily 'on an excessively pathologised view about the roots of anti-homosexual prejudice and overlook the importance of this fear of sexual objectification and bodily affronts to honour as aspects of heterosexual masculinity' (Tomsen 2009:106). The book evidences well the problems with essentialist assumptions about homophobia being *the* cause of anti-homosexual violence, which continue to overlook the role of heterosexual masculinities in this violence.

Tomsen's work therefore offers a more sophisticated, complex conceptualisation of violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people as based in corporeal masculinities and sexual, bodily boundaries. The book highlights well the discrepancies and discomfort with relying on homophobia as a catch-all explanation for anti-homosexual sentiment and violence. Most importantly, Tomsen does this while maintaining that injustice continues to prevail, particularly in our legal system. His analysis successfully demonstrates that, regardless of context, homosexual panic defence is an archaic historical relic that serves no purpose other than to continue to excuse the vicious murder of gay men on the basis of their sexual orientation. In addition, the book sends a clear message that violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender people persists in many forms and is inexcusable in any context, but responses to this violence are better informed by a more nuanced understanding than to slip into essentialist, pathologising arguments about homophobia. Indeed, Tomsen correctly notes that even criminologists need to explore further the role of masculinity in anti-homosexual violence and sentiment, and certainly governments and legal systems continue to almost completely overlook this as an important motivating factor when adjudicating crimes of this nature.

By drawing together interdisciplinary research and writing, Tomsen's book is an impressive contextualisation of research on these issues, and this makes it a 'must-read' for academics, researchers, and policy workers in this area. Although the focus of the research in this work is Australian, it engages with issues significant in a global context and is certainly relevant to international researchers in this area. The key strength of this book is that it leaves the reader with no doubt that, as long as we persist with essentialist understandings of violence, our legal system will continue to produce unjust legal outcomes.

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