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**Leading by Example: A Queer Critique of Personalization and
and Coercive Community Governance in Act Up–Paris’s
Operation Against the Bareback Writers**

‘Queer is bareback. [...] Guillaume Dustan is queer, there’s no doubt about that. And there is your problem. The staunchest defender of the movement is the biggest criminal of modern homosexuality.’ (Lestrade, 2003¹)

‘when you talk about putting dynamite up Dustan’s arse to blow him up [...] to be honest, you scare me’ (Héraud to Lestrade, cited in Broqua, 2005: 356)

‘Barebacking is a picture of what it might be for human beings in relation with each other not to personalize the future.’ (Phillips in Bersani & Phillips, 2008: 117)

This article revisits the bitter and personal six-year conflict (1999–2005) between prominent French HIV/AIDS campaign group Act Up–Paris and two writers of ‘autofiction’, Guillaume Dustan (1965–2005) and Erik Rémès (1964–).² In 1999,

Dustan and Rémès were first vilified by Act Up as proselytisers for bareback, in a move intended by the group to hold the French gay community to the consensus around condom-use forged in the early years of activism against the epidemic.³ This article undertakes a queer historiographical analysis of the bitter French feud over bareback, a particularly polarized and personalized local variant of an intra-communitarian dispute replayed differently in all three of the national contexts with which the present special issue is [directly](#) concerned. To what extent was Dustan really, as Act Up's co-founder Didier Lestrade alleged, both somehow at the vanguard of 'queer' in France and an exemplary community 'criminal' for his stance on bareback? What did 'bareback' mean in this context? Why did a fantasy of annihilatory violence take hold within Act Up in general and Lestrade in particular and how can the otherworldly calm which psychoanalyst Adam Phillips brings, with his comprehending vision of bareback in terms of *depersonalization*, help to envisage a way past the defensive embattlement of the opposing positions in what these quotations already indicate was more feud than 'debate'?

This article offers no new empirical facts about the dispute. The French bareback wars have already been extensively documented and interpreted by one of the other contributors to this special issue, sociologist and AIDES activist Gabriel Girard, in a rigorously even-handed account to which this article is greatly indebted (Girard, 2013), as it also is to the book-length study of Act Up–Paris by anthropologist and activist Christophe Broqua (2005).

Prominent queer theorist of bareback, Tim Dean, has recently resituated his own work on the practice and its subculture as part of an ongoing collective endeavour to understand and 'metabolize' some of what was carried culturally and psychically with HIV/AIDS into gay, or queer, bodies and communities:

Along with what came to be known officially as the human immunodeficiency virus, enigmatic messages were transmitted through sexual contact. For the past three decades, gay culture has been trying, in various ways, to translate those messages into a story that makes sense. (Dean, 2011: 90)

Dean's study of bareback thus increasingly involves, over and above the desire-laden participatory anthropology of *Unlimited Intimacy* (2009), a practice of reparative historiography, conceived psychoanalytically both after Freud as a 'working-through' (of collective and individual trauma) and after Laplanche as a decoding and disarming of some of the 'enigmatic messages' vectored alongside HIV/AIDS and still latent today in our exchanges, sexual and otherwise but especially sexual. The present article will endeavour to follow a similar path of queer historiography into the thick of the French conflict, although without intending to serve a psychoanalytic and liberal-political norm of 'reparation'.

A 'declaration of war' and the re-gaying of Act Up

Act Up opened the French front against bareback in June 1999, during the annual Pride march in Paris, which the group had attended every year since its launch at that event a decade earlier. (Broqua, 2005: 69, 313-4; Girard, 2013: 98-101; Lestrade, 2000: 41-2, 419). Posters featuring large black and white close-up images of unprotected anal and oral sex were plastered along the route of the march and all over Paris's gay heartland, le Marais. At the top, in block capitals, the rhetorical slogan-

question: 'BAISER SANS CAPOTE ÇA VOUS FAIT JOUIR?' [FUCKING WITHOUT A CONDOM MAKES YOU COME?]. Below the images and adjacent to the group's clearly identifiable logo, a short statement singled out Dustan and Rémès as symptomatic exemplars of a wider and growing indifference towards HIV/AIDS and as proponents, in their books, of 'a little cult of risk-taking' (Girard, 2013: 99). Lestrade, one of the three founding members of the Paris chapter of Act Up and one of the most vocal and tenacious opponents of bareback within that group, stated frankly, in his book-length history of the group, written at the time of the controversy: 'That poster was a declaration of war, as at the beginning of the epidemic.' (Lestrade, 2000: 419). This 'war' against bareback was thus also conceived by its instigator and leading strategist as an attempt to return the group to its origins and to re-engage with those whom Lestrade thought of as its basic constituency: gay men and particularly HIV-positive gay men. Lestrade had been President of the group from its foundation in 1989 until 1992 (Girard, 2013: 103) but had become increasingly sceptical about moves under his successors, as the 90s advanced, to engage in a broader, coalitional, queer-left, politics:

At a certain moment, around the middle of the 90s, you could say that all the residue expelled by the other HIV/AIDS campaign groups came to take refuge in Act Up. There were the angry deaf [*les sourds en colère*], the haemophiliacs, etc. (Lestrade, 2000: 74)

Lestrade's 'regaying' of Act Up was thus simultaneously envisaged by him as a 'cleaning up' of the organization in which a troublesome 'residue' too extensive to be enumerated in its entirety ('etc.') would learn that the hospitality offered by their

‘refuge’ could no longer be taken for granted. Disturbing though this admission is likely to be to a political sensibility schooled in coalitional queer studies and activism as we know them today, it would nevertheless be unfair to dismiss Lestrade solely as a reactionary identitarian motivated by a desire to reassert his personal power over the group he had founded, even if it is undoubtedly the case that his hard line on risky sex was only adopted by the group as a whole after a protracted internal power-struggle, chronicled notably by Broqua (2005).

Lestrade had been greatly exercised by anecdotal evidence of a return by some gay men to condomless sex when news of this first broke to a general audience in 1995: Michael Warner’s confessional *Village Voice* article of the same year, which first spoke openly about ‘unsafe’ and ‘risky’ sex in the mainstream US press, without yet using the word ‘bareback’ or its cognates, was translated into French for a special feature on the subject in the *Journal du Sida* of April 1995.⁴ Also included therein was a short opinion-piece by Lestrade, who first outlined his view, which would only some four years later become the official line of Act Up-Paris as a whole, that HIV/AIDS activists in particular were required, in their own intimate lives, to be ‘exemplary’ as far as condom-use was concerned and to recall themselves and those around them to their moral responsibilities. Lestrade was responding with outrage to the revelation by some HIV-positive gay activists at a conference that they had had unprotected sex. (Lestrade, 1995; Girard, 2013: 87-8)

The ‘political fiction’ of ‘bareback ideology’

Being ‘exemplary’ involved more than just always using a condom and enjoining others to do the same; Act Up decided it was also their duty as activists to police community adherence to the norm of condom-use. This required not just that Act Up set themselves up as exemplary role-models but that reluctant and, especially, unrepentant defaulting members of the community be made an example of; it required a public spectacle of their shaming to be staged for the moral instruction of their peers. To this end, the arsenal of coercive techniques which Act Up had developed in the early years of the epidemic was turned against two HIV-positive gay writers, who were made to function, in Girard’s very suggestive formulation, as ‘incarnations’ of bareback in the public debate (Girard, 2013: 101). Positive and negative poles of incarnated exemplarity were established, each with its readily identifiable personalized representatives: Lestrade (and Act Up) on one side, Dustan and Rémès on the other. Members of the French gay community were challenged pointedly by Act Up to choose sides – indeed at gun point in an image of a shotgun pointing directly at the viewer on one of the group’s posters from 2000 (reproduced in Girard, 2013: 106; see also Broqua, 2005: 326).

This polarization and exemplary personalization of the HIV-prevention debate was echoed and intensified in adversarial reporting of the story by both community and mainstream media, for instance in the daily newspaper *Libération*, which juxtaposed letters from both Dustan and Lestrade in their edition of 21 October 2000. Act Up’s polarizing way of presenting a complex issue was criticized as an unhelpful oversimplification by a few more astute commentators at the time (Broqua, Clouzeau and Martet, 2000). In following Act Up’s lead by opting for a personalizing and adversarial presentation of the issues, the media – subcultural and national – had continued to proceed as it had become used to doing in the first decade of the group’s

existence. The journalistic background and media savvy of key members of Act Up, including Lestrade, had enabled it to present stories to the press in precisely the way in which they would be most easily absorbed.⁵ Act Up was adept at ‘mainlining’ its story into the social body. In the operation against the bareback writers, the media drew directly from the group not only for the content but also for the form of this ‘story’. That adversarial form was also reflected in the group’s staging of a ‘General Meeting of Fags’ [‘Assemblée Générale des Pédés’], a public meeting called by Act Up for 7 November 2000, ostensibly to debate the issue of bareback. During the meeting, attended by some 400 people (among them Dustan, Rémès and Lestrade), the bareback writers were characterized by Act Up as strategists of an ‘ideological offensive’ [*offensive idéologique*] (Act Up–Paris, 2000: 3).

As Elliot Evans observes in this special issue (INSERT PAGE CROSS-REFERENCE), the redescription of bareback as a political ideology was a crucial moment in that it appeared to supply both a retrospective and a prospective legitimation of the coercive violence of Act Up’s ongoing campaign against the two HIV-positive writers. Yet, as Broqua’s analysis also shows, that redescription was a ‘political fiction’, albeit one with potent effects (Broqua, 2005: 345-6). It was indeed inaccurate to characterize Dustan and Rémès as ‘ideologues’ of bareback, or, as the posters of 1999 had, as high-priests of a ‘little religion’ of risk-taking. To the extent that they subsequently became ideologues, that was largely a consequence of the operation mounted against them by Act Up, during which they were repeatedly called upon to articulate and consolidate scattered off-hand remarks into a coherent ‘position’ (or ‘ideology’) and to ‘incarnate’ (to use Girard’s term again) and defend that position in a variety of intensively mediatized public confrontations.

In Dustan's 'autopornobiography' – as he called the autofictional trilogy of books based loosely on his own experiences and published between 1996 and 1998 – there had been several references to condomless arse-fucking, yet those books by no means advanced condomless sex as either an ideology or a new norm of gay sexual behaviour. I shall not review all of the references here but suffice it to say that it would have required either a very inept or a politically motivated reader indifferent to the genre of these texts (autobiographical fiction), to the particular affective tone of the few relevant remarks (tentative confessions) and to the epidemiological specificity of the subcultural context (a milieu in which almost everyone was HIV-positive) to misconstrue them as bareback 'ideology' in the way that Act Up did. The very first time unprotected sex is mentioned in the trilogy is typical in these regards: this is in conversation with the author-narrator's friend Cédric who tells him that nobody uses condoms any more, 'even American queens', because 'everyone is HIV-positive' (Dustan, 1996: 47).⁶ In other words, Dustan was recording, or 'archiving' (Davis, 2009), a widespread adaptation of behaviour within the narrowly circumscribed social world he is depicting, centred as that was on Paris's principal gay district, le Marais. Moreover, at the end of *Dans ma chambre* the self-tormenting author-narrator struggles to extricate himself from a milieu in which he fears he will end up infecting everyone.⁷ His is hardly the anguish of a bareback ideologue. This first book was published in 1996 and written before evidence within the community of the success of triple combination therapy treatments; Dustan's anxious self-torment also reflects a very particular biomedical moment. Moreover, in so far as Dustan's work was literature, it aspired to a suspension of usual social rules of propriety; as Derrida noted in 'This Strange Institution Called Literature', the democratic ideal of literature involves 'the power to say everything'. (Derrida, 1992: 36) Act Up's refusal to

recognize Dustan's claim to the freedom of literary space was its first coercive strike against not just against this particular writer but against the institution of literature and the ideal of democracy it embodies.

Even at the height of his confrontation with Act Up, in 2000, Dustan never went further in any of his public pronouncements on risky sex than to advocate what is now commonly referred to in the sexual health literature as 'serosorting' (Parsons et al., 2005). He confessed, initially with a degree of self-conscious anxiety, to the difficulties which he, as an HIV-positive young gay man, had in adhering to the inherited, and now vigorously reasserted, norm of compulsory condom-use while also trying to enjoy a rich and meaningful sex life. He was never an 'ideologue', not even of serosorting (if such a notion is even intelligible), let alone of 'bareback', if that term is taken in its minimal scope to denote unprotected sex between individuals who are either known to be, or who may perhaps be, of different serostatuses. As for the lurid world of 'gift-giving' and 'bug-chasing' beloved of the American subculture, that was never Dustan's concern.

Dustan's contemporaneous account of the confrontation, *Génie Divin* [*Divine Genius*] – for all the megalomaniacal overtones of a title which posits him, G.D., as a 'divine genius' – suggests, in its many desolate moments, that he had difficulty bearing Act Up's assault: 'I can no longer remember anything of Winter '00; I was entirely friendless. That is, I could no longer say 1) anything remotely intelligent or 2) anything even remotely about myself, without it exasperating them. Fuck you, Dustan. Piss off and die.' (Dustan, 2001: 234). Some four years later Dustan did indeed die but not even that prompted a softening of Act Up's line. Their sinister obituary was entitled 'Forgetting Dustan' [*Oublier Dustan*] (Act Up-Paris, 2005); it

contained not only a ‘political’ rationalization of indifference in the face of his death but a call, redolent of totalitarianism, for the active forgetting of his memory.

Erik Rémès, by contrast, contrived to turn himself into precisely the ideologue which Act Up had inaccurately accused him of being at the outset. Like Dustan, Rémès had started out as an early advocate of serosorting (Rémès, 1997). Yet four years after he was first singled out, in 1999, as a proselytiser for bareback, Rémès published *Serial Fucker: Diary of A Barebacker*, a book which takes Act Up slogans for its section headings and which includes moments of the most lurid bareback fantasy, in which the narrator imagines deliberately infecting others with HIV, both with and in some cases without their consent, although a simplistic reading of this text as either autobiography or incitement, or both, is frustrated by the caricatural excess of accompanying claims to want to infect Father Christmas and indeed God with HIV (Rémès, 2005: 294). That book also contains several plainly-spoken justifications of its own defensive violence: ‘I didn’t want to put myself in this position. I am not a victim. I am not an executioner. I am a free being. All I have done is respond when I was attacked.’ (Rémès, 2005: 286) Without Act Up’s coercive campaign it is most unlikely that this defensively offensive ‘barebacker’s diary’ would ever have been written; to that extent, Act Up can be considered a *de facto* co-author of this book punctuated by its slogans. As Rémès claimed there, ‘When this started I was not a BBK proselytiser’ (Rémès, 2005: 26). Ironically, in pointing to ideology where there had been none, Act Up’s operation, when it met with Rémès’s libertarian defiance, spawned a text which contains among the most overtly ‘ideological’ and multiply violent representations of bareback ever written, even allowing for the fact that the book describes itself generically as a ‘novel’ and that some of the violence can only plausibly be understood as fantasy.⁸

Very symbolic violence: "Let's spoil the books"

In the early years of the epidemic, the targets of Act Up's campaigning had mainly been state agencies and multinational pharmaceutical companies; to the extent that individuals were targeted it was primarily in their capacity as the official representatives of such bodies (Broqua, 2005: 203-41). The operation against the bareback writers was the first time Act Up had turned its formidable war-machine against individuals acting in a personal capacity and, moreover, against people who, as HIV-positive gay men, shared the same combination of three defining identity traits with those whom Lestrade envisaged as the group's own core constituency (Broqua, 2005: 323). If the writers were ideologues then they had set themselves up on the same footing as the political targets of the early era and could legitimately be targeted in similar ways. While Act Up's campaigning in the early 1990s had occasionally crossed the line from symbolic (verbal and performatively represented) violence to physical violence against individuals, like its US counterpart it had declared its commitment to the principle of non-violent civil disobedience (Broqua, 2005: 214-5).

Reservations were voiced in private by some members of the group about the risk of 'fascism' in their attack on the bareback writers (Broqua, 2005: 324), reservations which echoed those of observers when the group had zapped certain institutional targets in the early 1990s (Pollak, 1991; Le Talec and Cauchy, 1991). Nevertheless, the historically all too resonant climax of Act Up's operation was reached with a manoeuvre dubbed by its tacticians, notably the group's then President,

Victoire Patouillard, “Abîmons les livres” (“Let’s spoil the books”). The target was Rémès’s *Serial Fucker* when it was first published in 2003; activists masquerading as customers visited bookshops to furtively crumple pages and tear covers, thereby seeking to render a target of twelve copies of Rémès’s book per activist unsellable (Broqua, 2005: 357). Alongside this semi-clandestine mission against the books in their commercial materiality, activists zapped the offices of the publisher, Editions Blanche, trashing the place. Although Broqua (2005: 357) somewhat elliptically remarks that the book-spoiling venture was ‘evocative of sombre practices’ and qualifies it, curiously, as both ‘unusual’ [*inhabituel*] and ‘unprecedented’ [*inédit*] in the history of the group, he offers no further interpretive comment on this striking development. Yet the ritualized destruction of ‘un-German’ books by fire, in 1933, is so well known a moment in the history of Nazi Germany that it would be highly implausible to suggest that this resonance of “Abîmons les livres” could have escaped all of the activists involved. Indeed, both the furtive nature of the operation against Rémès’s book and the attempt to strike a tone of jaunty inclusivity with the first-person plural imperative formulation (“Let’s... spoil the books”), are consistent with a disavowal and so also an awareness of this very resonance. That first-person plural can also be understood as the expression of a group for which, by 2003, the ethical logic and historical resonance of its actions had come to matter less than the political necessity of its own collective self-assertion. With its militaristic language, the shaven-headed or close-cropped hairstyles of some its male activists, its combat trousers and boots, its developed sense of strategy, its sloganeering and its direct action, Act Up had from its inception been a hair’s breadth from ‘fascism’, as several contemporaneous commentators had remarked (notably Pollak, 1991). In the operation against Rémès’s book, one so unpalatable that not even the group’s semi-

official chronicler, Christophe Broqua, will comment on it, it had realized elements of that ‘fascist’ potential in previously unparalleled ways.

In Lestrade’s view, however, Act Up’s operation against the bareback writers did not go nearly far enough and this prompted him, in 2004, to disown the group he had co-founded. Writing four years earlier, at the height of the controversy but ostensibly commenting on direct action protests by the group in earlier years, Lestrade had been sanguine about the unpredictable effects which ‘pressure’, even of a symbolic kind, could have on its targets: ‘We are an entirely wild [or savage] group [*un groupe complètement sauvage*] in which the worst can happen because we subject our targets to such pressure that it is impossible to know in advance how they will react.’ (Lestrade, 2000: 93) Such indifference to the collateral effects of carefully orchestrated ‘pressure’ is one thing – ethically speaking – when the target is a multinational pharmaceutical company or state ministry but quite another when it is a lone individual. As though the book-spoiling tactic were not resonant enough of Nazism, in the closing lines of Lestrade’s autobiography for the 1980s, published in 2002, he likened Dustan and Rémès to the ‘brambles’ he had been clearing from a friend’s garden, adding that ‘when these brambles have been burned away, new shoots will be able to grow’ and concluding that, once the brambles are cleared, ‘It’s clean.’ (Lestrade, 2002: 349) I shall revisit the preoccupation with ‘cleanliness’ in relation to bareback at the close of this article, but want merely to note here that the German word used for the book-burnings was *Säuberung*, ‘cleansing’, and to suggest that “Abîmons les livres” and Lestrade’s yearning for a *tabula rasa* to allow for healthy and clean gay descendance are both very clearly indicative of a subtending fascist imaginary.⁹

Role models and unintended consequences

The weakness of the personalizing logic of exemplarity can be illuminated by analysing it in continuity with the concept of the role model. To seek to influence or inspire others, especially the young, by providing them with exemplary ‘role models’ with which to identify has become a prevalent strategy in gay and lesbian activism (e.g. Stonewall, 2012), as in a wide range of other activist and social policy arenas, from ‘gender equality’ to discussion of the ‘legacy’ of the London 2012 Games. The concept of the role model is, moreover, presupposed in many governance and managerial scenarios. Indeed, the ‘role model model’ of social influence is now so very entrenched that it has acquired a certain invisibility as a model. That people in positions of authority, of responsibility, or merely of visibility (‘celebrities’) are, whether they like it or not, ‘role models’ for those younger in age or more junior in status is a commonplace yet nonetheless a coercive expectation.

If the universal expectation of exemplarity is itself coercive – if the model of the role model is itself a socially coercive instrument – then it was also deployed by Act Up in a way which unwittingly modelled not just safe sex but stigmatizing coercion. We are not free to delimit at will the full extent of our own or others’ exemplarity: in their operation against the bareback writers, Act Up offered an exemplary lesson not just in safe sex – their intention – but alongside it and unintentionally one in stigmatizing coercion. Furthermore, that accompanying lesson was a performative contradiction of the other functions Act Up had tacitly fulfilled, alongside its official mission, in its first decade. From the outset Act Up had been much more than a single-issue campaign group. It had simultaneously functioned as a

highly effective artisanal apparatus of care, nurture, refuge, socialization, autodidactic medical education, mutual support, destigmatization, affect-processing and identity-consolidation for HIV-positive gay men most especially, as for gay men generally (Broqua, 2005: 243-71; for an analysis of the ‘affect-processing’ functions of Act Up in the US see Gould, 2009). It had, moreover, successfully developed these care-giving functions against the prevailing macro-political climate in France of a Republican universalism which refused, as a matter of principle, to recognize the collective existence and identity of minority communities in their particularity; it had needed to do so to compel state agencies to take the specific needs of the French gay community vis-à-vis HIV/AIDS into consideration (Boulé and Pratt, 1998).

Exemplary role models are always assumed to be coherent and unified subjects who influence other coherent unified subjects; the primitive and inherently authoritarian fantasy of the role model’s efficacy, shared so widely in our supposedly non-primitive culture, is that of a charismatic passing of an unambiguous message from one person to another. It fails to allow for the fact that no individual can communicate merely one message in any situation of social interlocution when the full performative context of such interlocution is taken into consideration. To put this figuratively, social interlocution conceived in its plenitude is analogue rather than digital; texts, performances and people always hiss and crackle. The personalized role model model of social influence presumes otherwise and this is partly why role models are so often the source of disappointment. The bareback wars show the effects of ‘overspill’ when role models lead by example: in the case of Act Up, it was not merely a matter of activists serving as exemplary models of safe sex for the community, as they had intended. As they endeavoured to be exemplary in one

regard, activists simultaneously advanced a coercive and personalizing moralism as a new norm of gay socio-sexual interaction.

'Kapos of the ghetto'

That members of Act Up were setting themselves up as the 'sex police', or 'moral police', was a view articulated within the Parisian gay community at the time and that sentiment had a particular resonance in a national-linguistic context in which *flic* [cop] was, as it remains, a term of abuse in many quarters.¹⁰ Echoing, intensifying and relaying this sentiment, the bareback writers would characterize members of Act Up and others who also believed in imposing their norm of compulsory condom-use more emotively still as 'kapos of the ghetto' (Rémès, 1997; Rémès, 2005: 16; Dustan, 2001: 138).¹¹ This reflected, without reproducing exactly, the currency within North American bareback subculture of the term 'condom Nazis'. I want to note a difference between the polemical figures of the 'condom Nazi' and what looks like its near-translation, 'kapo of the ghetto'. Although historically there were numerous non-Jewish kapos, it is likely – given that the word 'ghetto' also figures in this phrase – that the bareback writers were intending to liken Lestrade and company to the concentration camp functionaries who were Jewish. (Wolf, 2007) By contrast with the 'condom Nazi', in the case of the 'kapo of the ghetto' the coercing agent is also a member of the community he polices; yet to say that the *kapo* is a member of that same community is not to say he belongs to it in a straightforward sense – for he is also evidently a traitor – but only that he shares its key identity trait, the trait by which the police order knows, and in virtue of which it oppresses, the group to which he

belongs and does not belong. The violence of the kapos proper was also a spectacle, a show of sadism intended to disavow the vulnerability they shared with their victims by virtue of sharing that key identity trait (Wolf, 2007). The fact that the *kapo* is, in principle, interchangeable with those he polices gives rise to a show of exemplary violence motivated by a frantic attempt to disidentify from those he brutalizes.

The polemical redeployment of the *kapo* figure to characterize activists who wished to prevent others from contracting an incurable disease, however misguided some of their tactics may have been, was about as historically oblivious as Act Up's book-spoiling campaign; yet that campaign also served as a retroactive justification of that redeployment by closing the circle of intracommunitarian vilification. While the term *kapo* is far too gratuitously resonant of other contexts, it does encode a certain justified scepticism about the coercive conception of community governance implicit in Act Up's operation. I shall now argue that this insight can be more readily understood if this rhetorical weapon is 'disarmed' and the thought re-elaborated in less problematic terms.

Being exemplary in the state of emergency

The *kapo* is, positionally, an intermediate figure in a hierarchy of coercion whose violence is, as well as being violence, a placatory spectacle destined for those immediately above him who could easily turn on him if he fails to show sufficient zeal in his own acts of disidentification with those he resembles. The *kapo* not only takes the model of sadism from those immediately above him but overperforms that

model –with exemplary zeal – because he fears the consequences for himself of not doing so.

At the beginning of the epidemic there was a significant danger, in France as elsewhere, of highly authoritarian external policing of the gay community; in 1986, Jean-Marie Le Pen, then leader of France’s ever-popular far-right Front National, had echoed calls first voiced in some quarters of the medical establishment for the creation of ‘sidatoriums’, or facilities to forcibly contain people infected with the virus, embellishing that minority medical opinion with a demand for the compulsory tattooing of the infected, also in its own way highly resonant of the concentration camp (Favre, 1992: 116). Le Pen’s comments were in keeping with similarly extreme calls for coercive responses to the epidemic voiced in other national contexts (Watney, 1997: 44). Thus Act Up’s militarism, along with the immediate benefits of good organization for any form of activism, has also to be understood as a spectacle of the community’s capacity for disciplined and effective self-governance. The condom and the norm of its use were not only an effective means of safeguarding the health of individuals but a universally recognized token of the gay community’s collective capacity to self-police; the normalization of the condom in the early years had held off even greater violence. The condom was thus a barrier against coercive external policing, the only viable compromise at a particular biomedical moment in the face of a credible threat of repressive external policing. The condom became the badge, or token, of as responsible and presentably clean an identity as could possibly be claimed by gay men as sexual beings at one precise historical and biomedical juncture. Yet it was also a marker of that community’s self-organized containment and an expression of its fear of external sanction. The condom and the cast-iron consensus which was so quickly established around it had served to keep far more

repressive forms of external policing at bay at a moment of collective as well as individual vulnerability. It had served to protect and also to designate a community under threat during the long state of emergency in which people were dying.

Early in his gradualist exposition of ‘Panopticism’, the system of surveillance coextensive with disciplinary power, Michel Foucault (1977) suggested that some of the key elements expressed in Bentham’s infamous model prison and re-expressed in the concept of surveillance to which that edifice, in turn, lends its name could already be discerned in provisions from the seventeenth century for a state of emergency in times of plague. When plague strikes, the town will be partitioned; inspectors and municipal officials, organized in a rigid hierarchy, scrutinize the population for signs of illness.¹² ‘Inspection functions ceaselessly’, Foucault tells us in his dramatizing renarration of the hyper-regulated time and space of plague’s state of emergency:

Every day, too, the syndic [municipal official] goes into the street for which he is responsible; stops before each house: gets all the inhabitants to appear at the windows [...] he calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and every one of them. (Foucault, 1977: 196)

This duty to manifest oneself – as the English military locution has it, ‘all present and correct’ – is the subjective reality of the state of emergency: anxious and compliant self-exposure before the gaze of power. What the family at the window signal by their very presence there is that they have yet to contract the disease and are without taint; they are identified by the state’s hierarchy of officials as ‘clean’. Perhaps no society can function without some degree of mutual inspection; indeed, this kind of scrutiny, particularly when it involves the development of a written record, may also be part

and parcel of what is involved in any apparatus of care, as Bernard Stiegler has argued in a recent critique of Foucault's account of disciplinary power (Stiegler, 2010: 107-43; Davis 2013). Yet Foucault's seventeenth-century householders remain inside and play along with the city's ordinances 'on pain of death' (Foucault, 1976: 196). In other words, the choice tacitly offered by the state is the alternative between individualizing exemplarity – the self-isolating and compliant manifestation of one's own cleanliness – and death. It is hardly surprising that living under a state of emergency should provoke anxiety if compliance is assured 'on pain of death'.¹³

Dean has contended that there comes a point when the psychic burden imposed by the strain of living in a sexual 'state of emergency' is no longer sustainable, in the sense that sustaining it would outweigh or nullify the value of the life it ostensibly protects with its policing (Dean, 2012: 78). Dustan too spoke of, 'the anxiety, the total panic which has gripped us since AIDS, which informs, disgorges, suffocates everything, food, people. Absolute paranoia. [...] We can no longer live like that.' (Dustan, 2001: 145-6). In seeking to prolong the 'state of emergency' after the biomedical context changed with the advent of triple combination treatments in 1996, Dustan sensed that Act Up was betraying the aspiration of members of the gay community to one day be able to stop being quite so exemplary in their behaviour and thereby enjoy greater freedom from anxiety. Exemplarity in sexual behaviour, however exactly that is construed, readily intersects with the excessive expectations of exemplarity in other areas of life that often disproportionately burden gay or queer subjects: dress-sense, body, career performance, sexual prowess, aesthetic appreciation, sensitivity, citizenship, etc. The psychic strain of the expectation to be an exemplary subject across many or all of these areas simultaneously is, I would suggest, one significant but under-recognized factor in the statistically significantly

higher rates of depression and anxiety so often noted in these populations but usually explained, at least in the better studies (for instance: Chakraborty et al., 2011), primarily or exclusively by reference to the suffering caused by discrimination. This may partly be because discrimination can more readily be investigated empirically than the depressive and anxious shadow of our own and others' expectations.

For Freudian psychoanalytic theory – and therapeutic practice – to insist on exemplarity is to strengthen the idealized inner template against which the censorious and castigating superior part of the self, the super-ego, belittlingly measures our own and others' performance (Freud, 1991: 367-9; Lear, 2005: 167-72). Psychoanalyst though he is, this was not exactly Phillips's point in the discussion from which the third part of my epigraph was taken (Bersani and Phillips, 2008: 117). In the course of that book-length exchange with Leo Bersani, Phillips also stages a very public psychoanalysis of Bersani's resistance to bareback, a practice which Bersani, like Lestrade, sought to anchor in the culpable person of Dustan and his work. For his part, Phillips is concerned less with the burden of exemplarity and more with the promise of a depersonalized, or 'impersonal', intimacy which bareback suggests to him. If bareback offers, as Phillips asserts, a 'picture' of how human beings can relate to one another without personalizing the future, this is because in allowing for, or even eroticizing, the possibility of seroconversion it figures a future in which we are no longer quite so attached to what we now hold so dear (Bersani and Phillips, 2008: 117). Although bareback emerges from Phillips's rather elliptical engagement with the topic more as a figure for depersonalizing individual and collective transformation than a real sexual practice, there is no reason to be squeamish about the fact that it has bred such thoughts in a fertile mind, nor to police them away with a misplaced sense of sociological rigour; indeed, that very figuration can itself be understood as a

salutary depersonalizing move to draw some of the egoic and superegoic heat out of this conflict.

Keeping it clean... or not

When they appear at the window in the plague town Foucault's householders try to look presentable, endeavouring to display themselves in a cleanliness free from signs of illness. That such self-presentation takes place against the background of a tacit threat of death-dealing violence may help to explain why their compliance is tinged with anxiety. In so far as the gay community confronting the epidemic in its early years resembled these terrorized householders, what of the cleanliness displayed at the window? It is no accident that Dustan's arse was where Lestrade would have placed his high explosives, since another overspill effect of Act Up's operation (and of the norm of condom-use more generally) was the erasure of what I shall reluctantly, but for the sake of clarity, call anality. As well as the lives which were lost and the immeasurable suffering which ensued, the arrival of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s interrupted something significant that 'bareback', in all its forms, was also attempting to rediscover: what could be termed 'arse-sex-positive' gay sexuality. Alongside the increasingly democratized dissemination among gay men these days of arse-sex-positive techniques such as fisting, rimming and the use of extravagant butt-plugs, bareback also has its place.

The norm of compulsory condom-use had allowed an unambiguously clean anality to prevail; the condom shielded us not only from the external threat of coercive violence in the early years of the epidemic but also from shit and anxiety

about it, both our own, our partners' and that which the wider heteronormative culture projects on to us as a corollary of, or metaphor for, our dirty passion. Barebackers have certainly wanted the 'intimacy' of an 'unlimited' and sometimes 'impersonal' kind expressed by the enhanced penile enjoyment available to an uncovered dick. Yet overemphasising the condom – or indeed its absence – in discussion of bareback risks focusing too much attention on one half of the sexual equation which bareback tries to name in the raw. Barebackers have also wanted and rehearsed a fuller and less sanitized relation to anality, an unmediated and unprotected relation to this particular erotic hole in the bodily surface. This does not mean that shit-sex is the inevitable next transgressive step after bareback, as has sometimes been claimed; rather, that shit can sometimes happen without that either dispelling desire or collapsing queer subjectivity back on to the abject. So it seems fitting that Beatriz Preciado mourned Dustan, the ideologue for bareback who was not one, with a selection of large butt-plugs, as well as with testosterone (Preciado, 2013).

HIV/AIDS and the norm of compulsory condom-use which was developed as a mainstay of the response to it came just at the moment when gay men in France, as elsewhere, were beginning to (re)discover new bodies and pleasures, in particular as they worked to undo or actively forget the crushing social verdict against arse-fucking and the terror of anality which – as Dustan's desublimatory intelligence had so lucidly grasped – undergirds so much homophobia. Relinquishing the medicalised 'rectum' of the epidemic, gay men today are rediscovering and reworking arse like never before and bareback in all its varieties will also have been part of this broader movement towards a fuller, arse-sex-positive, subjectivity with all of the psychic and socially transformative effects that shift promises. For as Hocquenghem (1993 [1972]) and Preciado (2000) suggested – in a proto-queer and a queer vision

respectively from either side of the state of emergency – in arse-work [*le travail du cul*], as distinguished from ordinary paid work, is to be found one salutary foundation of a less anxious and less ferociously personalizing new queer society.¹⁴

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¹ All translations are my own. The words ‘queer’ and ‘bareback’ appear in English, in italics, in the original.

² ‘Autofiction’ is a term coined in 1977 by French literary critic Serge Doubrovsky to describe books which contain both autobiographical and fictional elements. It was one of the dominant modes of literary production in France in the 1990s and remains so today. Hereafter ‘Act Up’ will refer to Act Up–Paris unless otherwise stated.

³ According to that consensus, condoms should always be used in all sexual encounters where there was risk of HIV-transmission, so certainly and principally for both oral and anal sex, whether or not the parties were regular or casual sexual partners and regardless of the serostatus of any of the those involved.

⁴ Although, as Girard demonstrates, there had been discussion among experts as early as 1990 – in the very same journal – of evidence suggesting that the norm of condom-use was no longer adhered to universally, a phenomenon referred to initially, in a minimal Gallicization of American AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) terminology, as ‘le relapse’ (Girard, 2013: 75-87).

⁵ Lestrade suggests he learned a lot from Act Up–New York, with its impeccably produced press kits of fifty-odd pages to accompany a zap or demonstration (Lestrade, 2000: 102).

⁶ This and all subsequent translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ I am grateful to Hector Kollias for this point.

⁸ This contrast between Rémès's radicalization and Dustan's far more hesitant self-defense is misinterpreted by Broqua (2005: 335), who gets the two figures the wrong way round.

⁹ The excesses of Lestrade's militarism did not go unnoticed at the time. Language used by Lestrade to figure HIV-positive gay men, in an attempt to shock them into always insisting on condom-use, as sexual 'grenades' waiting to explode, led to the formation of a short-lived dissenting splinter-group comprised mainly of former Act Up members who called themselves precisely *les grenades sexuelles*. See Rifkin, 2012: 205-6.

¹⁰ This has to do with cultural memory of the French police's zealous involvement in Nazi atrocities during the Second World War, a memory relayed by the 'events' of May 1968, a near-revolution catalysed by police brutality.

¹¹ Dustan also has a variant of the kapo/Nazi figure in which Act Up is likened to the collaborationist Vichy government (Dustan, 2001: 138).

¹² The French text says *quadrillage*, suggesting a division into sectors just like the city of Algiers at the height of the French army's 'pacification' of the independence movement in the late 1950s.

¹³ For a different reading of similar Foucauldian material see Butler, 1997: 83-105.

¹⁴ Preciado's text, originally written in English and Spanish, was first published by Editions Balland in a French translation by Marie-Hélène Bourcier and appeared in France's first ever specifically gay/lesbian/queer series, under the editorial stewardship of... Guillaume Dustan.