
H-France Review Vol. 21 (August 2021), No. 135

Christophe Broqua, *Action = Vie: A History of AIDS Activism and Gay Politics in France*. Translated by Jean-Yves Bart and Kel Pero. Foreword by David M. Halperin. Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2020. xviii + 319 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$125.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4399-0320-9; \$125.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-4399-0322-3.

Review by Dan Callwood, UK Civil Service.

In his address to the French people on 12 March 2020, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, President Macron declared that this was “la plus grave crise sanitaire qu'ait connu la France depuis un siècle.”[1] This is useful political rhetoric, but in its sweep ignores successive previous health emergencies. The HIV/AIDS crisis—which hit France particularly hard compared to its Western European neighbours—is an important case in point. Of course, HIV and Covid-19 are very different viruses with very different epidemiological and political consequences. However, this latest virologic crisis, and Macron’s lofty erasure, does raise the question as to how the HIV/AIDS crisis fits into French history, especially at a historical moment when the intersection between public health and politics is more pressing than ever.

In this way, the translation of Christophe Broqua’s 2005 monograph on Act Up Paris is both welcome and timely. In the past decade, perhaps spurred by a new desire to re-evaluate a disease that has (at least in the West) been safely contained by medical advances, there has been a scholarly and popular upsurge in interest around the early years of the HIV/AIDS crisis and its political consequences.[2] This interest has centered mainly on North America, perhaps in part due to the vivacity of HIV/AIDS politics there, and particularly Act Up New York’s extensive video archives. But France has not been absent from this rediscovery. Robin Campillo’s film *120 battements par minute* (2017) brought Act Up Paris vividly to life for a new generation.

In its original edition, Broqua’s monograph was one of the first scholarly monographs on a French gay political organisation, an academic corpus that has continued to glow slowly but persistently since.[3] Broqua’s book spans the life of Act Up Paris from conception to the present (the organisation, unlike many other chapters that sprung up worldwide, continues to campaign). Broqua’s monograph is technically a work of sociology, but in his sensitive use of archival and interview material, leans strongly into historical methods. Unfortunately, it must be noted that while this translation is generally sound, it sometimes does not deal well with the idioms of French sociology, or Act Up Paris’s activist language, and too often falls back on literal translation. The reader is sometimes frustrated by vague allusions to the group’s “orientations” or is confused at the assertion that one of the group’s texts appeared as an “appbull” (p. 205).

However, this edition has the advantage of a short, but valuable foreword by David Halperin, setting Act Up Paris against the contrasting history of its American cousin, helpfully foregrounding the key differences between the groups, particularly Act Up Paris's emphasis on the political primacy of the HIV-positive gay man (over a broader coalition politics) and the French chapter's sometimes near-puritanical approach to any depiction or defence of condomless sex. Broqua picks up these themes in depth as he tells the narrative of Act Up, following a roughly chronological structure, and using that chronology to zoom in on key themes and debates across the group's history. This is an effective structure for an organisation whose focus and debates changed swiftly as it rode the tiger of the epidemic and as the political and medical landscape evolved around it.

Broqua's book is at its most engaging as it tracks Act Up Paris's foundation in 1989, its early years and ideological debates. This is not surprising, as it is at this point in time when the group's task was most urgent, and its actions and debates most vital. Broqua brings this alive through skillful deployment of interview material. His interviews with founder Didier Lestrade particularly stand out in their candidness. Something that strikes the reader about these early years is the extensive use the group made of the language and historical memory of WWII, which permeates the group's publications and imagery. Broqua's source material is constantly referencing deportations, the Holocaust, collaborators, the Nuremberg trials, and of course the iconography of the pink triangle that was Act Up's international symbol. Wartime references were certainly not new in gay activism, but it seems to be that, when faced with the spectre and experience of death, it was the horrors of WWII that provided vocabulary and images strong enough to express contemporary pain and anger, and media attention.

Broqua's interrogation of internal group ideology is also strong. Perhaps another reason for Macron's silence over HIV/AIDS was that it lacked the sort of universalising quality of COVID-19, a quality that has particular purchase over the French cultural and political imagination. However, for HIV/AIDS, this question of the universalising qualities of illness was complicated by the way the disease impacted particular communities. Broqua regularly returns to the question of a gay community and its relationship to the state, brought to the fore by HIV/AIDS. Act Up Paris was torn between asserting its origins in the gay community and its solidarity with others affected by the epidemic, particularly as the infected blood scandal drew intense media attention after 1991. Furthermore, the question of interracial solidarity, so prominent in North American chapters of the organisation, was less pronounced in France, despite Paris's diverse population and the disproportionate impact of HIV on non-white communities. Broqua does not shy away from the shifting complexities of these debates, and expresses it best through Act Up Paris's own language of a "coalition" between disparate interests united by a virus, itself a term they had explicitly borrowed from ACT UP's name in English (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) (p. 80).

Broqua also explores the personal dimension of this tension between the individual and the universal. Act Up Paris put primacy upon the figure of the "HIV-positive gay man," making him the prime expression of the group's identity. Importantly, this gave political agency and personal self-esteem to men who felt robbed of both. It also led to interesting political tactics—HIV-negative group members becoming (or posing) as "politically HIV positive" when they acted in the name of the group, for instance. However, this valorisation of the HIV-positive man caused an unresolved tension at the heart of the group: a positive diagnosis must be made visible in order to reduce the stigma around it, yet at the same time, the spread of the virus must be resisted at all costs. This contradiction contributed to some of the group's fiercest controversies, particularly

with the writers Guillaume Dustan and Eric Rémès, whose literary depictions of casual, risk-taking sex caused outrage in the organisation in the mid-1990s. These later controversies came at a moment of medical revolution in HIV treatment which the group was slow to recognise, and can be read as bitter and exhausting in hindsight. However, the effort at de-stigmatisation of HIV-positivity must still be seen as one of Act Up Paris's most impactful contributions to the lives of gay men.

Broqua has revised his conclusion to take into account the two seismic events that have taken place since his original French edition—the passing into law of same-sex marriage in France in 2013 and the successful development of prophylactic treatments to prevent HIV infection. These developments in no way invalidate any of Broqua's assessments of Act Up Paris's ideology. However, he has chosen to tone down his original conclusion that “le sida reste incontestablement en grande partie, et probablement pour longtemps, une *maladie homosexuelle*.”^[4] This suggests that these events have gone some way to sever the link between HIV and homosexuality, at least in the national consciousness.

At times, Broqua's intense and dispassionate focus on Act Up's internal dynamics makes him somewhat reluctant to critique the group, or point out some of their more obvious hypocrisies. We are told that Act Up Paris's success was based in large part on their media-savviness and clever branding. Lestrade claims they aimed to “launch Act Up like a trendy band” (p.46). However, the group was swift to attack the media campaigns of others, sniffily dismissing the Red Ribbon Project's AIDS awareness symbol as “nothing more than a public-relations campaign” (p.182). This is a small example, but it reveals something of the group's self-regard that Broqua does not interrogate. Broqua's narrative would also benefit from more contextualisation, placing Act Up in the broader landscape of AIDS activism in France. Daniel Defert's influential organisation AIDES (founded in 1984) is key to the history of the HIV/AIDS response in France, but only sporadically referred to. Where this comparison does happen, Broqua provides the reader with real insight to contemporary debates and mindsets. For instance, we learn that Act Up Paris's approach to death was to turn it to spectacle (their 1994 “die-in” protest on the Champs Elysées in 1994 for instance). By contrast, AIDES saw death as something to be prepared for and to psychologically explore, so as to equip group members to provide support to others. This represents a deeper cleavage in the response to the HIV/AIDS crisis—whether to orient oneself towards political action or to charitable support, and where these two responses were intertwined. Sustained comparison of political approaches would have brought this important distinction to the fore.

This comparison leads us to the question of the impact of Act Up Paris more broadly. In his conclusion, Broqua defers the answer to a point in the future, once the group has disappeared, arguing that “the relevant question is chiefly about what and how the organisation has managed to exist for this long in Paris” (p. 278). This is, of course, an interesting question given the tendency of the most energetic activist groups to split and dissolve, but the reader is still left wondering about the group's impact. Did Act Up Paris's spectacular protests and media presence change government policy, public perceptions, or even the course of the epidemic in France? Or was the group's impact more importantly assessed at the individual level, in the lives it touched and changed as people navigated the strange new landscape of sickness, medicalisation, and grief?

Using Broqua's important book as a launching point also allows us to ask wider questions about how we place HIV/AIDS in the broader landscape of French history. Is it best seen as a disaster

visited on a number of distinct communities whose mobilisations should come to the fore, or a properly national event that required the intervention of the state to bring under control? And how does the response to the crisis affect our assessment of the relationship between the Republican state and its diverse citizens on a level as practical and vital as disease and death? Broqua's scholarship, and contemporary events, will hopefully provoke new answers.

NOTES

[1] "Adresse aux Français, 12 mars 2020," Présidence de la République, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/12/adresse-aux-francais>, last accessed 10 July 2021.

[2] See in particular Richard McKay, *Patient Zero and the Making of the AIDS Epidemic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); David France, *How to Survive a Plague: The Story of How Activists and Scientists Tamed AIDS* (New York: Vintage, 2017); and Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

[3] See Antoine Idier, *Les vies de Guy Hocquenghem: Politique, sexualité, culture* (Paris: Fayard, 2017); Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Massimo Prearo, *Le Moment politique de l'homosexualité: Mouvements, identités et communautés en France* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2014).

[4] Christophe Broqua, *Agir pour ne pas mourir! Act Up, les homosexuels et le sida* (Paris: Presses Sciences Po, 2005), p. 406 (author's italics).

Dan Callwood
UK Civil Service
dancallwood@gmail.com

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172