

The Dilly boys

Mervyn Harris

Most male adolescents, on leaving home, head for the West End of London. Once there, many support themselves by prostitution. What is their life like?

London is an allure for outsiders. It is a gold-paved mecca, the West End is its temple and Piccadilly Circus the shrine.

Boys who become male homosexual prostitutes—Dilly boys—are mainly from urban working class slum areas. They are between the ages of 15 and 22 and have left home for various reasons. Many suffer from feelings of not being wanted, though this may be only a temporary phase in their lives brought on by parental misunderstanding or neglect. The gap between their desires and social goals, on the one hand, and the drabness and monotony of their real lives, on the other, are also important factors in their leaving home. Typically, Dilly boys have all left school early; are still in their teens; and have no qualifications, or very limited work experience, in unskilled or manual jobs. The West End offers an immediate and striking contrast to their former existence and many of them abandon restraint with a defiance and recklessness characteristic of adolescence.

The subterranean activities in the area are largely hidden from outsiders, and behaviour that could strike the middle class observer as disordered and unregulated, nevertheless has a certain structure. I started my own research project when isolated aspects about boys I met began to form a coherent pattern. There are few guidelines for studying deviance in its natural environment and my intention was to get to know a few boys as well as possible—the number turned out to be six—and hang about with them as they went about their ordinary activities. In due course I got to know five others less well and eventually made contact with another 17 boys. The field-work lasted 15 months.

Recruitment into prostitution is by chance, choice, knowledge or training. The boys learn about male hustling from their mates on the Dilly, or in a remand home, or through prior knowledge from incidents at public toilets in their home town. The fact of having nowhere to live in London is often crucial, as many Dilly boys "score" to obtain a pad for the night and a meal or a drink. The element of chance, for instance, is shown in the experience of Tommy, who arrived at Euston station and went back to sleep there at nights. Huddled in the station, he was approached twice by men, one of whom had a car, who offered to put him up for the night—discreetly informing him of what they expected in return. The suggestion was adamantly rejected and even hastened his return to Scotland. But the seeds had been planted for a way of fending for himself in London and when he returned several months later with a friend, they were soon both "on the game."

Although a chance encounter in Piccadilly Circus was also the opportunity through which Jimmy first gained knowledge of male hustling, it might have remained an isolated experience if he had not met other boys soon afterwards who were engaged in this practice. A boy will be informed by his friends where to go and be given elementary advice on how to behave and the approach to adopt. The knowledge that the profession has a set of norms and a code is a vital form of comfort and solidarity to the new recruit in the initial stages. Boys are not compelled, or coerced,

to submit to the advances of an adult. The hunted becomes the hunter by making himself available. This is where choice comes in and the individual becomes responsible for his actions. The matter of knowledge—and the choice of whether to act upon it—shows in the observation of one boy: "In the toilet, someone gives me a wink. I do not want to know, but I know what it's all about."

The career of many boys may start simply for economic reasons, but more often such a way of life offers a means of resolving adolescent sexual conflicts. Adolescence is a period of sexual indeterminateness and experiment, when sexual desires are most continuous and pressing. The boys do not think of themselves as homosexual and most will not admit to having homosexual feelings. There are some who deliberately flaunt themselves as gay to attract customers, but these are a small minority. All of them express and attempt to live up to the masculine, physical virtues of urban working class youth. The fact that they come from areas of poverty, and lack further education, does not mean they are dull or stupid.

The constant and daily hustling for money requires a certain amount of ingenuity and many are articulate, if not often perceptive. There is something naive and instinctive about their reckless letting go of themselves which is reminiscent of childhood years. Unlike middle class youths, who work towards establishing a career and acquiring slowly increasing possessions, the Dilly boys indulge in a continuous squandering. Their concern is with what is directly and immediately apprehended by them. The sense of freedom was seen by one boy in these terms: "A steamer [client] picks you up, pays you £5 and you spend it just how you like."

Once on the Dilly, a boy's existence is characterised by idleness and seemingly aimless hanging about. There are no regular hours and a boy will usually rise late and drift through the afternoon until evening approaches. He may roll and smoke a couple of joints of pot, meet a friend, play pin ball, or con a cup of tea or a meal, depending on the amount of money in his possession. Some of the boys may not have scored the night before and the successful ones have quickly spent the money. This routine can also become tedious and boring and other, harsher realities begin to intrude. The winter months offer less protection to cold and hungry bodies and lean times may accentuate feelings of loneliness and depression. A sense of desperation is never far away, for as one boy observed: "It is harder to hustle for bread than to work at a job. But everyone lives in a dream world, in a fantasy, to get rich quick."

The outlook of a boy, the way he perceives things, shifts as his career moves into its various phases and is determined by his experiences, how he has adapted to the style of life, or whether he is on the verge of leaving. He may view matters bitterly, philosophically or with an air of detachment. The recent past may be idealised ("Now you have to approach people, hunt for prey. Before they used to come up to you") but, in the actual present of the lives of the Dilly boy, hustling maps out their movements

Their world mainly revolves around sex, where human nature and desires are seen in all their manifestations: the sadistic, masochistic and the grotesque. They will tell you that there is no such thing as a "straight [normal] person. Everyone is kinky." This expression of their sense of themselves through their physical being was seen by one boy in this way: "It is using your body to go through life and earn some money. It is also an experience, something you have done and that you have gone through and will probably never go through again. But it stays with you. It's like giving you a feeling of being real, that you have done something."

A few boys remain solitary figures, keeping to themselves, but most boys have one or two good friends whom they continually meet. There are no gangs or structured groups in the area and, when a number of boys come together, a casual, diffuse or fleeting group may be formed. Although their circle of acquaintances is not necessarily confined to other male prostitutes, there is nevertheless an implicit recognition of themselves as Dilly boys. There is strong competition among the boys for, as one of them remarked: "They're all going out to con a steamer, trying to outdo each other." They tell each other who they have been with, but not what they do sexually with a client. The subject of buggery is taboo, although a few allow and even encourage it to take place. Fellatio is the rule, with the client as the fellator.

The seemingly aimless hanging about is swiftly transformed into a keyed-up idleness at the prospect of an encounter with a client. The approach of evening seems to stir the boys to renewed activity, a nervous, heightened tension as the boredom of the afternoon is shrugged off. There are several standard techniques for a pick-up between client and prostitute. In meetings, the look, the nod of recognition, the opening for the approach is important. Experience and skill is always of use to both parties. Sometimes the meeting may be brief and blunt and, at other times, the bargaining may be more elaborate. This is how one boy, who had been on the game for a few years, explained it: "Before it was more basic. You named a price and what you would do. Today there is more talk and haggling. Sometimes after you have been speaking to the guy for a little while, he would just go, and you would end up by asking him, 'Can you let me have some money for a cup of tea?'"

As hustlers, the cardinal rule of the code for all Dilly boys is to gain as much as possible at minimum effort or cost to themselves. The rules are of a negative character, in the sense that they are concerned with what a boy does not do. This rule serves more than one purpose. It enables a prostitute to perform his function on a regular and routine basis, so that he can repeat it briefly and at intervals with other customers. To lie passively and let the client be the active partner is part of the rationalisation that a boy was not really a party to the act and that his masculinity is still intact. Yet a boy may want to shorten the transaction with the client so that he can get back to his mates, girl friend or his drink in the pub. He will then find it necessary to simulate excitement or enthusiasm in order that his client will reach an orgasm more quickly.

Nearly every one of the boys has a certain number of regular clients and it is with one of these that he may begin to respond actively. A wealthy client, who had reached a position of eminence in the medical profession, became strongly attached to Peter and they would sometimes drive down in a Rolls Royce to spend weekends at the client's country home. Peter described to me several times the many gadgets and



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splendid furniture at the house. But he was a lively boy, brimming with energy, and once the newness had worn off he became bored and restless to get back to the Dilly and his younger companions. Peter began to feel that the client was treating him as a son and he found the long, serious talks and constant advice irksome. The client was interested in helping Peter to better himself but he wanted, for instance, to choose some of the clothes he bought for Peter. The growing demands of the relationship were encroaching on Peter's sense of independence and they soon parted.

Clients with average means, but bizarre sexual predilections, can also offer the boys a great deal. A number of boys told me of the fun they had when they went to the home of a client who paid them a small sum for letting him play servant and waiting on them. They would order him to polish their shoes, serve them drinks and they might watch television while he cooked them a meal. One boy with long hair and a good physical presence, was invited to the home of a client and all the man wanted to do was sit on a couch beside the boy, touch his hair and admire his physique. He would say to the boy: "I guess you must be very attractive to girls" and encourage the youth to talk about his sexual exploits. He seemed to revel in the descriptions he heard, but would not make further advances to the boy.

A customer usually has to be satisfied and a rule of the code is for the boys to play along in the game which the client has requested and is paying for, even if the boys find it odd or do not share the make-believe and fancies that they are asked to perform. This particularly applies to clients who have fetishes and who may create imaginary situations—such as the man who pretended and behaved as if parts of his body were mutilated. But the code of the Dilly stipulates that a boy should never break the illusion of a client by laughing or ridiculing it. This gives to their activities the appearance of a game. It is why they refer to themselves as being on the game and was put

in this way by one boy: "It's all a game—a game of fantasy. You hustle guys for bread and then go and spend it all on chicks. Most of the guys are straight."

The boys have a wide network of choice from amongst the stream of girls who come nightly into the West End for social reasons and in the hope of finding excitement. They may also strike up casual or other relationships with the young girls who are, like themselves, on the game. The girls come from similar backgrounds and situations to the boys, roam around the Dilly with the same abandon, frequent and solicit at some of the same places and pursue a similar pattern of activities.

Sue, one of these girl prostitutes, was an attractive 18 year old with a warm personality. She had been to an approved school and was still on probation. Besides the friends she had made in the West End, she also saw four girls who had come from her home town, Middlesbrough. She told me, over a cup of tea, of an incident with a client a few days previously which, in retrospect, she found amusing. She was picked up by a man who gave her £5 when they entered the taxi to go to a hotel. But when the taxi stopped at traffic lights she made an attempt to get out and run. The man caught hold of her, there was a brief struggle—and he got his £5 back. Later, she started going out regularly with Nick, a male prostitute of 20, and they took a room. A couple of months after, Sue was arrested for soliciting and the next day Nick was arrested in the room. He was prosecuted on a charge of living on immoral earnings and sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

Most of the boys and quite a few other West End "residents" I spoke to, suggested that, even ten years ago, male hustlers surpassed female prostitutes in the West End, but statements like these are difficult to verify. However, a similar suggestion is made in Laud Humphreys's recent study in America of homosexual encounters in public toilets, *The Tea Room Trade*. The Homosexual Law Reform Act, 1967, seems to have made little, if any, difference to the activities on the Dilly. It is almost unknown for a boy to be apprehended by the police on a charge of soliciting or importuning. The main offences for which the boys are arrested concern loitering or obstructing the pathway; being in possession of drugs; petty larceny; breaking and entering; and intent to steal from persons known or unknown. There are always a number of boys who are taken into a remand home, held there while investigations are carried out and reports come through from probation officers, then allowed to go after spending four or six weeks inside without any charge being made.

This is what happened to Colin three times in two years. His first encounter with the police was on the day following his arrival in London, when a huge number of people were assembling around Trafalgar Square for a protest meeting. It was the Sunday of the demonstration against the war in Vietnam, organised by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in October, 1968. Although only dimly aware of what it was all about, he joined the milling mass of demonstrators and on the way picked up two empty Coca Cola bottles. He put them in his pocket with the aim of collecting the deposit on them from a shop. But he was stopped later that afternoon by the police and taken into custody for being in possession of an offensive weapon. He spent four weeks in a remand home before he was released. Then 18 months later he was apprehended for loitering and obstructing the pathway in Piccadilly and this time spent five weeks in a remand home.

The threat of continual harassment and arrest for being in possession of drugs faces all boys in the West

End; and the right of policemen to stop and search suspects provides an additional source of aggravation dividing "them" from "us." Dennis was arrested and fined for having a small amount of cannabis. He was an easy-going lad and one friend described him as being unlucky and another as not being sharp enough. He was arrested two months later by the same policeman who had arrested him earlier. This time he was sentenced to three months in a detention centre for having two LSD tablets. He strenuously denies this charge and says it was planted on him.

The police are no longer seen as representatives of an authority which is there to uphold justice, but as opponents in a game played very seriously with few holds barred. It is you against them and, in the ensuing moves, justice often fades and only the fittest and smartest survive. The boys sometimes feel they are being apprehended for reasons which have little to do with justice or rationality and sentenced by a magistrate or judge for whom they feel no trust. There are few good fuzz and, behind nearly all the boys' accusations, so they claim, is a lived experience to back up the grudge. But their views are pervaded by confusion of the function of the police. As one youth remarked: "When a chap becomes a policeman he loses something. He then forgets you're a person. He is just carrying out instructions and is only interested in what you have done, not what you are."

The boys have to be alert not only to avoid getting into trouble with the police but to prevent being exploited and, in their jargon, taken for being "a cunt." Their sensitivity to being pushed around, or done in, extends to their larger view of the world where their desire is for a greater share of the goods produced by society. They have come to see nearly everything as a "hustle" or a "con" and think people who talk about the morality of right and wrong are either suckers or hypocrites. They see the possession of money as being all-important for, without money, "you are nothing." It therefore does not matter how you earn your money as long as you have it. Some of those with the power of wealth can be admired and respected because they must really be smart to have got away with it. They rationalise their actions as not being criminal since "everyone robs." It is only that others get away with it, while they are picked on. Their values are on the same plane as the rest of society, only carried to a further extreme and emphasising leisure and pleasure to the exclusion of other aspects.

The career of a boy as a male prostitute is only a temporary phase in his life, coinciding with his struggle through the doldrums of adolescence. And because of the emphasis on youth in the homosexual world, he is already getting too old by the time he is 23. But the passage back to conventional society can be difficult, as the social labelling of persons as deviant serves to segregate them from others and this means that their deviant practices and their self justifications for these practices, are contained within a relatively narrow group. The creation of a specialised and punished role helps keep the rest of society law abiding.

The realisation that their youth, their most valuable asset, is slipping irretrievably from their grasp may come at various stages in the career of a male prostitute. Or it may be sudden and sharp. Typical of the sudden awareness and the consequences it entails was the comment: "And then you're 23 and it suddenly hits you that you're not so young. You look at yourself and what you see isn't so pleasing. You have no trade or qualifications. You're stuck and you don't know how to get out. And then you think, who are you . . . another Midnight Cowboy?"

Algeria after independence

Philip Peters

It is now almost ten years since the French left Algeria. There have been two coups since then. How is the present regime managing?

Algeria attained independence on 3 July 1962, after a guerrilla and terrorist conflict which lasted eight years and attained a ferocity unrivalled in modern times, apart from Vietnam. Since then, it has experienced only two coups—one almost immediately after independence, when Ben Bella came to power, and the other in 1965, when he was replaced by Houari Boumedienne. What is Algeria like now, as the tenth anniversary of independence approaches?

On the surface it seems to be the saddest, most uptight of the three north African countries. In Morocco, the poverty of shanty towns and the persistence of tribal life are offset by a *dolce vita*—with the court setting the tone and all who can joining in. In Tunisia, there is a certain liberalism despite, or within, the single party. In both these countries, the tourist trade is booming. In Algeria, with no liberalism, no conspicuous *dolce vita* and very few tourists, the atmosphere is sombre. In the towns, a high proportion of women are veiled. In the villages, women are absent from public places: there are no women in the *suq* (market). The puritanism of Mediterranean male honour complements that of the Muslim cleric and both somehow dovetail with a military regime whose soldiers and gendarmes are numerous, well distributed and seem to mean business.

This sombre atmosphere has deep roots in Algeria's distinctive history, which is quite different from that of its two neighbours. It is not merely that the Algerian war of independence was long, quite exceptionally brutal and fought not only against an army, but as a civil war between two communities (neither of which could abide the thought of domination by the other, or could imagine a compromise). It was also that the colonial situation lasted much longer in Algeria—130 years—and assumed quite different legal and political forms. In Tunisia and Morocco, the notion of a "protectorate" meant that institutions and elites maintained their continuity—quite conspicuously so in Morocco. By contrast, the fiction that "Algeria is France" meant that most institutions were destroyed and the Muslim population was pulverised into a virtually leaderless working and middle class.

It is this which really sets the scene. Just as, say, in Ireland or Malta, the church is the only institution above village level available to the peasantry, so in Algeria, Islam (and a special kind of Islam) provided the only available means of self-definition and organisation. Traditionally, Islam in north Africa, as elsewhere, has many faces, ranging from the learned urban lawyer-scholar-theologian to the ecstatic, doubtfully orthodox mystic, or the rural hereditary holy man. Colonial domination had unwittingly favoured the urban scholars, the *ulama*. The rural holy man, with his superstitious practices, had possessed a role in tribal life—but the tribal structure was now eroded. The *ulama*, on the other hand, were much better equipped to provide moral, and in due course political, leadership to the urban

mass. So a national consciousness was born under the banner of the struggle with superstition. The open aim of the *ulama*, to which the colonial authority could not very easily object, was to purify Islam of superstition. In so doing, they laid the foundations, ideologically and organisationally, of a national movement.

But if this was the historic role accorded it by Providence, the movement still took its original and avowed aim very seriously—namely, that of propagating a rigorous and purified Islam. It is this tendency which sets the tone today. Theoretically, Islam has no church and no clergy. But the *ulama* are not a bad substitute for either and, today, an historic debt is being paid. It could be said that as this crypto clergy kept the nation alive in the days when it was fragmented and passively accepted domination, the nation must now pay its debt by conforming to the clergy's values. And some of these values, like those regarding the position of women, seem in any case to be approved by most of the population.

Tunisia and Morocco also have a *ulama* who are concerned with reform, but there it is only one aim amongst many. In Algeria, reform is of prime importance and somehow dovetails in neatly with a military dictatorship and its ideological shadowiness. In Tunisia, though some of Bourguiba's recent right-wing twists are said to have favoured Muslim fundamentalism, the state nevertheless remains clearly secular and Kemalist. In Morocco, the monarchy is both too traditional and too modern for the *ulama*. The king, when not presiding over the *dolce vita* of the much expanded state machine, is happy to arbitrate between sections of the population and certain factions—as his ancestors had done in the past. (The two roles are not in conflict.) But it is all not-reformed-enough, or much-too-reformed-by-half, for the clerics. They give him no trouble, however. He can dissolve their main centre of instruction, a university with mediaeval roots, by *ukase* (an edict), without any political after-effects. In brief, the puritans are but one minor piece on a board which they do not dominate. In Algeria, they are far more important.

Of course, no ideology has ever dominated a society through gratitude for "services rendered." The appeal of a puritan Islam must also be rooted in the contemporary traits of a society. To understand these, one must once again look at the past.

Colonial Algeria had been economically dominated by a minority of something approaching a million Europeans. Mounting horrors during the war meant that, when the Muslims won, the Europeans did not wait to see what life under Muslim rule would be like. Virtually all of them departed. This had a number of consequences, amongst them the emergence and growth of large entrepreneurial petty bourgeoisie. This class has done well out of independence, but it does not exactly rule: key positions are reserved for an elite drawn from the survivors of the struggle