

Chapter 5

Paranoid Politics, Extremism, and the Religious Right: A Case of Mistaken Identity?

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In June 1998, the city council of Orlando, Florida, approved the flying of rainbow flags from city light posts. The flags were paid for by a private group and were flown to show support for Walt Disney World's "Gay Days." Gay Days is a weekend event at Walt Disney World that attracts thousands of gay men and women. The weekend itself has attracted negative comment in the past, but the flying of the flags in support of the Gay Days weekend created an entirely new conflict. On the June 8, 1998 broadcast of the *700 Club*, Pat Robertson, a leading spokesperson for the religious right, stated:

We'd better respond according to what the Bible says. The Apostle Paul made it abundantly clear in the Book of Romans that the acceptance of homosexuality is the last step in the decline of Gentile civilization.

So if the United States wants to embrace "degrading passions"—according to the Bible, something that the Bible says is an abomination against God—we're not in any way, shape, or form hating anybody. This is not a message of hate; this is a message of redemption. But if a condition like this will bring about the destruction of your nation, if it'll bring about terrorist bombs, if it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor, it isn't necessarily something we ought to open our arms to. And I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you. (Transcript of broadcast, June 8, 1998)

Within two weeks of this statement, devastating fires engulfed a large portion of central and north Florida. Pat Robertson explained the presence of these fires on the June 24, 1998 broadcast of the *700 Club*:

This is a terrible tragedy in Florida. And you know, as I've been reading and praying, we had quite a flap the other day when we were talking about that gay pride day in Orlando and everybody laughed, but nevertheless, here's what I saw in the Bible. There are two things that I think are every significant. And what happens to these fires in Florida could be a prelude to some things that are going on all around the world. It just has to do with terrible drought, but it also is caused by lightning. Lightning keeps striking.

And this is in the Book of Revelation; you'll find it interesting. [Quoting Revelation 8:7] "There was an angel who sounded," it said, "his trumpet and there came hail and fire"—and, of course, fire is lightning—"and it was hurled down upon the earth. A third of the earth was burned up, a third of the trees were burned up, and all the green grass was burned up." And that's exactly what is happening. It was lightning strikes. And I saw on CBS last night the reporter said these fires cannot be stopped by man and says nature is not cooperating. (Transcript of broadcast, June 24, 1998)

Scholarly literature has consistently characterized the discourse of the religious right as "extremism" and "paranoid politics."¹ Is Pat Robertson being "paranoid" when he states that the Florida fires are the result of Orlando's support of Gay Days? Or is his call for fellow fundamentalists to stop the spread of homosexuality a manifestation of "extremism"? The terms extremism and paranoia, which have been used to characterize the religious right, come from a larger body of socio-political theory that builds on the work of Smelser (1963) and Parsons (1954). Scholars who write about the religious right cite Lipset and Raab's (1970) conception of extremism and Hofstadter's (1965) understanding of paranoid politics when trying to explain or characterize actions taken by the religious right. Are those labels accurate? Are the actions of the religious right paranoid and extreme?

For Lipset and Raab (1970) and Hofstadter (1965), "extremism" and "paranoid politics" result when corporate status displacement becomes anomic status displacement. Individuals have real social displacement, of an economic nature, that they then attribute to a target population. The target population is blamed for the change in social status, and is further seen as engaging in a conspiracy to deliberately take over the status of the affected group. Individuals make this inferential leap, from personal economic dispossession to a generalized social conspiracy, because of their low educational backgrounds and susceptibility to monistic political appeal.

It is my intent in this chapter to show that characterizing the Christian right as engaging in "paranoid politics" and "extremism" is a misapplication of the socio-political terms. The religious right has experienced neither economic instability as a result of a rise in the gay and lesbian population's status, known as "the quondam complex," nor have they attributed a status strain to gays because of a susceptibility to monistic

political appeal, referred to as “low democratic restraint.” Posing an alternative conception of the religious right’s actions is beyond the scope of this paper.² However, it is important to illustrate that the terms with which we have been labeling the religious right have a very narrow application. And while the terms may reflect how we feel about the actions of the religious right, such characterizations limit our available responses.

In order to demonstrate that the religious right is neither paranoid nor extreme, I will explain: (1) how a quondam complex occurs and its necessity for paranoid politics; (2) how the necessity of the quondam complex for paranoid politics and extremism rules out the application of the terms to the religious right; (3) how low democratic restraint occurs; (4) how the religious right’s actions fail to qualify as low democratic restraint; and finally, (5) the implications of misapplying the terms paranoid politics and extremism to the actions of the religious right.

Throughout the paper, I will use the terms extremism and paranoid politics interchangeably. While they may be defined differently in other contexts, in Hofstadter’s and Lipset and Raab’s work they result from the same economic and social context. The social conditions that lead to paranoid politics (as defined by Hofstadter) also lead to extremism (as defined by Lipset and Raab). Since I am interested in determining whether the social conditions that lead to either of these terms have been present during the religious right’s actions against homosexuality the terms can be used interchangeably.

Quondam Complex

The term quondam complex comes from Lipset and Raab’s *The Politics of Unreason* (1970), but the concept is similar in Hofstadter’s (1965) and Smelser’s (1963) work. The quondam complex results from economic and political dispossession. That is, the people within the paranoid movement feel that the targeted group has usurped their economic status and that they have no political channels open to them in which to make their grievances known.

Hofstadter describes the anti-Catholic sentiment of the nineteenth century to illustrate how paranoid politics results from status strain. During the nineteenth century, immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, were displacing skilled Americans from jobs. Americans, particularly rural Protestants, felt their economic status threatened by these immigrants. Rather than attribute their displacement to particular individuals, Protestant Americans generalized their anger toward the Catholics as a group. Protestant Americans began to see Catholics as libertine, “the confessional as

an opportunity for seduction, licentious convents and monasteries, and the like" (Hofstadter 1965, 21-22). Additionally, the depression of 1893 was alleged to be an intentional creation of Catholics, who caused it by starting a run on the banks.

Lipset and Raab (1970), in describing social strain, reference the anti-Catholic movement and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In attributing the KKK movement of the nineteenth century to social strain, the authors indicate that "the disaffection of members of the white lower middle-class [sic] and working class is inevitably set against what they feel is not just the rise of the Negro population but a rise which is taking place at their inordinate expense" (510). Thus, the increase in economic mobility of black Americans, coupled with an increase in tax-supported programs for black Americans, led some white Americans to feel economically dispossessed. This dispossession was generalized to the entire black population, resulting in the KKK movement.

In these illustrations the structural strain necessary for extremism or paranoid politics develops first as personal displacement from some social and economic status and then becomes generalized or nativist bigotry. Four conditions appear to be necessary for extremism or paranoid politics to result from social strain. First, people are attracted to a movement because they have personally felt the strain. Second, this strain relates to a livelihood or status defined by income. Third, the targeted population has benefited from the social strain, but not to the extent that the movement comes to believe. Fourth, a leader or "paranoid spokesman," who has also been negatively impacted by the social strain, emerges to unify those who have been affected.

Economic Status Loss and the Religious Right

If this type of economic and social status loss is necessary for extremist movements to result, then the religious right's campaign against homosexuality does not qualify as paranoid. Neither the current economic situation in the United States nor the religious right's discourse about homosexuality indicates that gays and lesbians are displacing religious fundamentalists in any economic sense. To begin with, religious fundamentalists do not all share the same economic status. Those professing fundamentalist beliefs come from all economic strata: low, middle, and high. Thus, they do not have a shared social status that can be taken away. A paranoid movement, however, begins as a perceived economic displacement.

Further, the paranoid spokesmen, necessary to unify the movement, clearly have high status and have not experienced a recent economic status loss. Pat Robertson, for example, heads an organization with 1.8 million members and an annual budget of \$27 million (Salter 1998). He also recently sold his Family Entertainment Network to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation for a reported \$1.7 billion. The most outspoken members of the religious right's movement are the least susceptible to the type of status loss necessary for paranoid politics or extremism.

The social status of religious fundamentalists, as well as that of the majority of Americans, has been on the rise for some time. Unemployment is low, mortgage rates are at a thirty-year low, and our national deficit is on the decline (NBC News, September 21, 1998). If Hofstadter's theory of paranoid politics and Lipset and Raab's theory of extremism were to hold true for the religious right, the amount of anti-homosexual action should be declining. This is not the case. People for the American Way (PFAW 1997), which tracks anti-homosexual initiatives state by state, indicates that in 1996 there were more incidents of anti-homosexual activity by religious right groups than in the four previous years.

The public discourse of the religious right relating to homosexuality does not evidence social or economic dispossession by gay men and lesbians. In fact, religious right spokesmen argue just the opposite; that is, that the numbers of homosexuals in the population are exaggerated. Lou Sheldon, leader of the fundamentalist group Traditional Values Coalition, has stated that the homosexual population "is less than 1.5%" and that "studies have proven that nearly 85% of those who ever practice homosexuality for a season either return to heterosexuality or celibacy as a lifestyle" (Letter to members, October 10, 1995). The religious right does not feel dispossessed as defined by Hofstadter and the others. They do not feel that "America has been largely taken away from them and their kind" (23) by homosexuals.

It could be argued that while the religious right has not experienced a change in social status that has economic origins, they are experiencing a change in social status that has cultural or value origins. I would agree with those who would make this argument. America is undergoing changes that are inconsistent with the culture and values of fundamentalism. For example, the decline in the nuclear family and the subsequent rise in alternative family structures undermine fundamentalist family values.

However, cultural or value status changes do not result in a quondam complex. To be labeled paranoid or extreme there has to be: (1) a change in status that has economic origins; (2) a real, individualized change in

status; and (3) a change in status that is the result of an increase of status of the targeted group. To experience the quondam complex fundamentalists must perceive the breakdown of their own families. They must also attribute this breakdown to homosexuals. Thus, while it could be argued that fundamentalists have perceived a threat to their cultural status, it cannot be said that the threat has economic origins, that fundamentalists have been personally impacted, or that they have attributed the threat to homosexuals. Extremism and paranoid politics are not labels that can be used to describe action resulting from cultural or value changes.

Political Impotency and the Religious Right

If the quondam complex, and thus extremism or paranoid politics, is to apply to the religious right, there must also be an indication that they feel politically impotent. Lipset and Raab write, "In addition to identifiable group displacement, there was something more precise taking place in each of these periods [of extremism]: formal political alignments were shifting, and the conservative political party was usually in trouble" (485). Hofstadter claims that, "the paranoid style runs dangerously near to hopeless pessimism" (30) and that, "since [the movement's political] goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's frustration" (31). Therefore, if we are to apply the quondam complex to the religious right we must first address whether the religious right felt that they could not address their concerns through traditional political means. Second, because extremist movements typically align themselves with the conservative party, we would have to determine that the conservative party has been in trouble and losing strength.

In regard to the first test of political impotency (that is, pessimism about political action and unattainable goals) the religious conservatives would concede very little political failure of late. Religious conservatives claim credit for the Republican Party's overwhelming victory in 1994. Brian Lopina, lobbyist for the Christian Coalition, claims that "the Christian Coalition is responsible for the election results, our grassroots got the Republicans elected. So we made them more influential" (Personal communication, October 14, 1996).

The results of an exit poll conducted by Mitofsky International indicate that the religious right deserves this credit. That poll found that 20 percent of voters in the 1994 Congressional election considered themselves evangelicals or born-again Christians. Additionally, three out of four of those Christians voted Republican. This represented "the largest single

voting bloc among Republican voters. It represents just about a third of the Republican vote" (Green in Niebuhr 1995, B1).

In addition to their ability to mobilize on behalf of the Republican Party, the religious right is now afforded unprecedented access to the legislative process. Robert Raben, counsel to Rep. Barney Frank (D.-Mass.), told Gregg Zorova of the *Los Angeles Times* (1995) that Andrea Sheldon, lobbyist for Traditional Values Coalition, "is a diligent and pervasive presence at some of the most high-profile hearings. . . . She is omnipresent" (E1). Beverly LaHaye of Concerned Women for America sent a letter to her members stating:

CWA has been called upon by U.S. Senators and Representatives

- To testify before Congressional committees more times in the first five months of this year than in all of last year.
- To attend and provide pro-family input at "mark-up" meetings where vital pieces of legislation are drafted.
- To furnish senators and congressmen with research on a wide range of issues. (May, 1995)

And Dr. Robert Simmonds of Citizens for Excellence in Education, stated in an interview with the author:

Since the change in congressional majority, influencing legislation has been easier for us. Members of committees routinely call us now for information about pending policy and to get our viewpoint on issues. Republican members are receptive to our issues and make use of the research we undertake. (Personal communication, March 27, 1996)

If anything, the access to lawmakers has made the religious right feel more optimistic about their political chances today than they ever have in the past. Lou Sheldon has stated, "Give us a few more years under the belt and we will learn how the system works, we'll work the system even better than one could ever imagine" (CNN News, September 2, 1990).

To address the second task, that of showing that the conservative party has lost strength, scholars of political parties determine strength by examining two functions: the party-in-the-electorate function and the party-in-the-government function. The party-in-the-electorate function refers to a party's ability to organize its electoral capacity—to mobilize voters, to provide resources to candidates, and to get their candidates elected. The party-in-the-government function refers to a party's ability to design and implement a unified policy agenda (Herrnson 1994).³

The Republican Party's majority rule of Congress in 1994 is a clear indication of party strength. The Republican victory indicated exceptional electoral organization that was also accompanied by unification behind a clear policy direction—the "Contract with America." The Republican Party meets both tests of party strength. As such, it can not be claimed that the conservative party has suffered recent trouble significant enough to block conservative involvement in traditional political outlets.

Given the optimism about their political fortunes, the ability of the religious right to mobilize politically, the lack of a shared social status, and the good economic condition of the country, it seems implausible that the religious right's actions against homosexuality are due to a quondam complex. What remains to be seen is whether the anti-homosexual activity of the religious right emanates from "low democratic restraint."

Low Democratic Restraint

Low democratic restraint is caused by "conspicuous distortions of the patterns of value, and of the normal beliefs about the situation" (Parsons 1954, 169). The people suffering from the distortion of "normal beliefs" direct aggression toward the perceived source of social strain, in what Smelser characterizes as an unreasonable response to the situation. In the extremist or paranoid theories of social movements, members have low levels of education. These individuals have a general susceptibility to an uncomplicated narrative about the causes of problems and their possible solutions. Lipset and Raab indicate that the member of conservative social movements tends to "favour a simplified view of politics, to fail to understand the rationale underlying tolerance of those with whom he disagrees, and to find difficulty in grasping or tolerating a gradualist image of political change" (108). Thus, members of social movements who have low democratic restraint, characterized as paranoid, are uneducated, have distorted value or belief systems, and react unreasonably to social strain.

For the purposes of this chapter, I will not try to address whether religious conservatives can be considered, on the whole, uneducated. I will, however, discuss whether they exhibit the kind of belief system that characterizes paranoid or extremist groups and whether the organization's actions can be considered unreasonable given its members' belief system. Lipset and Raab describe the distorted belief system as one in which belief follows action. Specifically, the authors argue, "reservoirs [of belief] have typically been revitalized by and used by political developments, rather than being the genesis of them. . . . Right-wing extremist movements

have not sprung up out of nativist bigotry; they have sprung up out of backlash against change which invented or reinvented nativist bigotry” (491).

To illustrate how a distorted belief system is formed, Lipset and Raab provide a small case study of extremism. The authors tell of a Jewish couple who were terrorized for over a year by a gang of boys in the early 1960s. When the boys were caught and their families questioned, there was no evidence of anti-Semitic belief. The families did not engage in anti-Semitic discourse, they did not belong to anti-Semitic organizations, and no anti-Semitic literature was found in any of the homes. Additionally, none of the activities of the teenagers outside their homes, other than the instances with the Jewish couple, had anti-Semitic proclivities.

In analyzing the year-long activity, Lipset and Raab found that it was only toward the end that the boys began making anti-Semitic references. In the beginning they were making anonymous calls randomly. The boys narrowed in on the Jewish couple because they responded especially fearfully. Even after honing in on the couple, the boys did not use anti-Semitic tactics. Well into the year, the boys discovered that anti-Jewish comments added new life to the terrorization. It was only then that their remarks became singularly anti-Semitic.

What makes the belief system distorted, then, is that the paranoid person is predisposed to certain activity and the belief system is strictly an instrument used in this activity. In discussing belief as an instrument, Lipset and Raab state:

The juvenile gang in San Francisco had no difficulty plucking it [anti-Semitic belief] out when they had use for it, although their previous acquaintanceship with it had been no greater than that of other Americans. The level of their folk anti-Semitism was not the key to their anti-Semitic activity; the key was their inclination toward cruelty and their willingness to use anti-Semitism to further that cruelty. (495)

Low Democratic Restraint, Belief, and the Religious Right

For the religious right to be considered paranoid or extremist, they first would have to be willing to act against homosexuality, and then use a belief system to justify or further that action. The religious right however, is defined as a group by a unified, pre-existing belief system. Strict fundamentalists, open fundamentalists, and establishment evangelicals, who are generally lumped together under the label of the “religious right,”

believe first and foremost in the inerrancy of the Bible. For them, the "Bible is the inerrant Word of God and should be interpreted literally as such" (Hunter 1991, 68). The text of the Bible is the source of all religious and moral authority. The Bible outlines clear boundaries between right and wrong that result in absolute standards of life and thought.

This literal interpretation of the Bible leaves little room for doubt about the sinfulness of homosexuality. In Leviticus 20:9 of the New English Bible (NEB) it states, "If a man has intercourse with a man as with a woman, they both commit an abomination. They shall be put to death; their blood shall be on their own heads." In his landmark book *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, which is considered generally sympathetic to gay and lesbian interests, D. S. Bailey (1955) finds this passage an unambiguous condemnation of all homosexual acts. This unambiguous condemnation, when combined with other Biblical passages, permits the religious right to engage in anti-homosexual politics. For example, "You shall reprove your fellow-countryman frankly and so you will have no share in his guilt" (Leviticus 19:9, New English Bible) informs the religious right's belief in the sin of homosexuality, but also allows its members to believe that those who do not speak out against homosexuality are as guilty of homosexuality as those who engage in homosexual conduct.

The story of the city of Sodom, told in the book of Genesis, further illustrates to the religious right the danger of homosexuality. In this story, God destroyed the city of Sodom with fire and brimstone. Abraham tries to intercede on behalf of those who did not engage in the "egregious" acts by asking in Genesis 18:22, "Wilt thou really sweep away the good and bad together?" He pleads with God to spare the city even if only ten good men can be found. God saves only Lot and his family, who are recent citizens of Sodom. God destroys everyone else. This story allows the reader to assume that God considers all citizens, even young children, guilty or guilty by association.

If we consider a passage by the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, the danger of homosexuality for the Christian fundamentalist is even greater than death. Paul writes, "Make no mistake: no fornicator or idolater, none who are guilty either of adultery or of homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers, will possess the kingdom of God." If fundamentalists believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, if the Bible states that homosexuality is punishable by death, if it also states that they will share in their neighbor's guilt if they do not reprove his behavior, and if it concludes that the kingdom of God

is denied to the guilty, then the Christian fundamentalist who does not actively speak out against homosexuality risks not only death, but the loss of salvation. Silence about homosexual issues is equated to death and then damnation.

Given this belief system, are the anti-homosexual actions of the religious right irrational? That is, can we say that their actions do not logically follow from their beliefs? Examining both national and local occurrences indicates that the anti-homosexual actions of the religious right are rational. Nationally, homosexuality has been slowly gaining acceptance among the U.S. population since the late 1960s. In a Gallup poll conducted in July 1998, 31 percent of Americans polled believe people are born homosexual, up from 19 percent in 1989 and 13 percent in 1977 (Gallup in Schneider 1998, 1838). During the same period in which homosexuality gained acceptance, the fundamentalist population declined. Smith (1992), of the National Opinion Research Center, found that the percentage of Americans who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible has actually decreased from 65 percent in 1963 to 31 percent in 1989. The trend is actually running counter to the beliefs of the religious right. Because of this trend, and during this same time period, we have seen an increase in religious right anti-gay activity.

To illustrate how these trends have led to religious right anti-gay activism, consider their most recent advertising campaign. A coalition of fifteen religious right groups launched a series of advertisements beginning on July 13, 1998, in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *USA Today* claiming that homosexuals can be converted to heterosexuality through faith. The "Toward Hope and Healing for Homosexuals" advertisements are a direct result of a meeting of conservative group leaders in late June 1998. These leaders had specifically met to discuss the "anti-Christian" reaction to the remarks of Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott that called homosexuality sinful and the growing trend toward an essentialist view of homosexuality (Gersen 1998). The advertisements with the message that homosexuals can change were aimed at heterosexuals who believe that one is born homosexual.

Locally, these national trends get played out even more explicitly. For example, in a Brookfield, Connecticut, high school, pink triangles were placed outside seven classrooms designated as "safe zones" for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The parents of one student complained to the school board in a letter stating, "This is a homosexual agenda. This is homosexual recruiting. This is disgusting. This is illegal." As a result of this letter, a group of area residents called Committee for the Defense of

Classroom Tolerance and a teacher filed a libel lawsuit against the parents. The school board also voted 5-2 that the "safe zones" should remain.

The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), founded by Pat Robertson, became involved to provide legal and financial support to the parents. The ACLJ also dedicated a seven-page national newsletter to the case in which Jay Sekulow, chief counsel for ACLJ, wrote, "Can you imagine, that in public schools of America today, students are being taught that homosexual conduct, which in many states is still deemed illegal, is not only a viable alternative lifestyle, but is actually equal to heterosexual relationships?" (PFAW 1997). Thus, not only did fundamentalists experience a rise in pro-gay sentiment within their community, they also felt the weight of state-sanctioned institutions, the schools, and the courts against them.

As Bruce (1984) in *Firm in the Faith* points out, "the liberals' view that conservatives are narrow-minded and bigoted misses the point that such characteristics are not characteristics of the individuals who *become* conservative evangelicals; they are logical and socio-psychological consequences of the belief system" (89; emphasis in original). The rise in anti-gay activity by the religious right can be directly attributed to a greater acceptance of homosexuality by Americans. Additionally, specific actions by religious right organizations are often taken to defend against actions by other community members, the schools, the courts, or state and national legislatures. Thus, the religious right is informed by a logically ordered belief system that justifies their actions. Paranoid groups, on the other hand, are not.

I am not contending that spokesmen such as Pat Robertson do not use the fundamentalist belief system to further their political agendas. What I argue is that the typical fundamentalist American, who does not seek personal political gain, engages in anti-gay activity because of specific and clear religious beliefs. And, because he or she is reacting to a threat that they believe leads to their damnation, neither their beliefs nor their actions can be considered of "low democratic restraint."

Discussion

Since, as I have shown, the religious right has neither a quondam complex nor low democratic restraint, they can not be considered paranoid or extremist. However, in addition to being a misapplication of the socio-political theories, the use of the terms creates political narratives (Roe

1994; Stone 1988) that have negative repercussions for gay and lesbian policy issues and activism. Narratives commonly used in describing issues are a force in themselves. These stories often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradictory empirical data because they continue to underwrite and stabilize assumptions in the face of high uncertainty, complexity, and polarization (Roe 1994). They illustrate not only how the religious right and other groups attempt to persuade but also how language gives meaning to social action.

The use of the terms “extremism” and “paranoid politics,” both in the media and in academic journals, creates political narratives that significantly undercut potential support for pro-gay initiatives. This occurs because the use of the terms is an ideological apparatus that reinforces hegemonic political systems. Labeling the religious right in such a manner gives the socio-political theories behind the label legitimacy. It confirms the accuracy of the label and the theories in describing the type of activism engaged in by the religious right. Ultimately, it subverts the political power of gay men and lesbians by forcing them to operate within political theories that do not account for or address their specific agendas and circumstances.

Further, labeling the religious right “extremist” or “paranoid” may itself be considered an extremist and paranoid act. Those who label come to be understood as extremist and paranoid. This transference of extremism occurs because, with the act of labeling, the labeler becomes engaged in political discourse with the religious right. Since the discourse of the religious right carries the extremist label, all discourse that follows is defined by that label. It becomes intradiscursively dependent (Foucault 1991, 58). In essence the political contest is taken to the religious right and then is played on their terms. The response required is necessarily an equally extremist or paranoid defensive tactic. Thus, classifying the religious right as paranoid or extremist has two narrative implications. First, doing so accedes the theoretical legitimacy of the terms in applying to, and restricting the legitimacy of, the political actions of the religious right. Second, doing so results in similar acts that entail restrictions of legitimacy of the political actions of pro-homosexual activists.

The ramifications of reinforcing political notions of extremism while engaging in extremism are that they force the gay community and its supporters into stances that Ruthann Robson (1992) describes as “separatism” and “assimilation.” Choosing to call the religious right “extremists” forces a response to the actions of the religious right that can be understood as similarly extremist, thus placing gays, lesbians, and their

supporters outside acceptable political activism. Understanding the religious right to be paranoid or extremist leads to separatist groups such as ACT-UP and activism similar to that related by Sarah Schulman (1994) in her tales of the Lesbian Avengers. The labeling of the religious right as paranoid can require a homosexual-centered activism where gays will work with other gays and nongays are unwelcome.

While emotionally and perhaps even logically justifiable, this type of activism can essentialize and reify issues that impact homosexuals. In effect, it constructs "gay" issues as unique and different from the issues of "other" Americans. By placing the fight with the religious right outside the boundaries of normative political action we deny the policy issues of homosexuals legitimacy and membership within this system.

Additionally, we open the door to further abuse and inequality of treatment because, as Michael Walzer indicates, in a political system "the denial of membership is always the first of a long train of abuses" (1983, 62). The evidence indicates that recent engagement of the religious right in political battles outside normative political activism has opened the door to further abuse. For example, as indicated earlier, religious right affiliation is on the decline (Schneider 1998). However, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in anti-gay activity (PFAW 1997), a flurry of anti-gay marriage bills in state legislatures, and Congressmen willing to bash gays and lesbians in the media (Trent Lott and James Inhofe in Gergen 1998). The contradictory evidence of the decline of the religious right and the increase in anti-gay activities reinforces the position that separatism leads to further abuse.

Resisting the religious right within existing, normative theories of political activism also has negative repercussions for gay policy issues. "Assimilation" requires the sublimation of gay and lesbian interests. It assumes that access to policy making will be granted and, once granted, change can occur from within existing hegemonic political structures. Kirk and Madsen's (1989) *After the Ball* is a treatise for assimilative activism. They claim that homosexuals are just like everyone else: "We look, feel, and act just as they do; we're hardworking, conscientious Americans with love lives exactly like their own" (379). By their logic, gay men and lesbians will be given the political access necessary to make policy changes if they will just act, look, and feel like the average American (whatever that may be).

With assimilative political activism homosexuals become simply an interest group with its requisite distribution of public goods, compromise, and instability of identity. As Theodore Lowi (1979) defines interest groups:

(1) Organized interests are homogeneous and easy to define. Any duly elected representative of any interest is taken as an accurate representation of each and every member. (2) Organized interests emerge in every sector of our lives and adequately represent most of those sectors, so that one organized group can be found effectively answering and checking some other organized group as it seeks to prosecute its claims against society. And (3) the role of government is one of insuring access to the most effectively organized, and of ratifying the agreements and adjustments worked out among the competing leaders. (51)

Political success depends on an interest's ability to organize and unify behind a single message of its group's desires, needs, and demands. Assimilative political activism requires homosexuals not only to think and behave within normative strictures but also to agree on issues, direction, and leadership. The danger of assimilation, then, is that it requires homogeneity both within the gay community and between the gay community and "other" Americans.

Conclusion

My primary purpose in this chapter has been to expose educators, researchers, and pro-gay activists to the possibility that taken-for-granted notions of "extremist" and "paranoid" politics may actually work against the interests of gay men and lesbians. My speculations are intended to encourage readers to think more critically about the "universality" of notions of political activism rather than to offer concrete recommendations. Nonetheless, I would argue that the act of labeling the religious right "paranoid" or "extremist" places gay activism within existing political theories. With such labeling we have in essence locked ourselves into two competing theories of activism, separatism and assimilation, neither of which serves gay and lesbian interests well.

When we choose to call the religious right "extremists" or "paranoid," we acknowledge the legitimacy of the theory those terms represent in explaining not only the activism of the religious right but also our own. If we characterize the religious right in those terms, the only avenue available to us is to engage in the normative political activism of interest groups that provides little help in addressing the policy issues of gay men and lesbians or, for that matter, the issues of any dominated group. The potential for political change depends, not on separatism nor on assimilation, but on forcing the hegemonic political system and its theorists to recognize alternative issues and forms of activism.

Notes

- 1 See Catherine A. Lugg (1998), Didi Herman (1997), Mortimer Ostow (1990), Grace Halsell (1986), Lowell D. Streiker (1984), and Gary K. Clabaugh (1974).
- 2 For alternatives to extremism and paranoid politics, see Steve Bruce (1988), Pamela Conover (1983), and Michael Wood and Michael Hughes (1984).
- 3 There is some dissention among theorists about the strength of U.S. political parties. Some scholars indicate that parties are strengthening and some indicate that the parties are in decline. Those studies that indicate parties are strengthening tend to define strength based on party-in-the-electorate characteristics (Crotty 1991, Longley 1992, Jackson 1992). Political parties as electorate organizations have been strengthening. Their election campaigns are more organized; they provide more resources to their candidates; and they engage in more types of election activity.

The theorists who claim political parties are weakening base their conclusions on the party-in-the-government function (Brady 1990; Sibley 1990). The lack of party-in-the-government strength is visible in the relative proportion of congressional "party votes" (that is, when 90 percent of one party votes against 90 percent of the other party). Between 1960 and 1994, only 5 percent of Congressional roll call votes were party votes. The confusion in the literature over party resurgence is therefore due to the differing measures used to determine strength.

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