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Social Movement Paper

The Christian Right

The Christian Right, from its conception as a grassroots social movement to its more institutionalized manifestation in conservative politics and lobbying, has maintained a commitment to traditional “family values” and the protection of family. The Christian Right’s intentional framing of their agenda as a preservation of the family unit not only made their message more palatable for sympathizers outside of their evangelical base, but it also created the foundation for which they could extend the logic of the family to its expectations of the state and its narrow image of what constitutes a true American. In particular, their construction of a moralism that wasn’t overtly religious aided in galvanizing a broader community to oppose lesbian and gay movements, created coalitions between varying sects of Christianity, and allowed for a veiled perpetuation of Christian supremacy despite an increasingly secular society. The Christian Right’s weaponization of family values against the LGBTQ movement is particularly salient in their tactics to secure heteronormative marriage, parent authority in public education, and protection of the innocent child in the social and political sphere.

The Christian Right centers their mission around family for a multitude of reasons. In applying a social movement organization framing analysis, scholar Melinda

Miceli notes, “frames that resonate with existing cultural beliefs and values are generally more successful than those that do not” (601). The Christian Right taps into the universal cultural belief of family as a positive entity, deserving of both material attention and protection. This pervasive belief of family as a sanctified, important force within communities allows for the Christian Right to construct enemies, whether physical or ideological, that threaten this agreed upon, precious unit in society. This movement, during its initial battle with the rising LGBTQ movement, had the advantage of also operating within the dominant cultural belief in American society, enforced in law and also romanticized in various forms of media, that the family structure is heteronormative. Miceli continues analyzing social movement processes by arguing that “morality politics issues are highly salient with little need to acquire any information (technical or otherwise) to participate in the debate” (Miceli 600). Due to the fact that most individuals participate in some familial structure, they are even more emboldened to engage in morality politics dealing with the family because it is an extension of this “common sense.” Organizations like Focus on the Family, were first able to operate outside of mainstream attention and gather an extensive following because their “overt emphasis on childrearing and families was viewed as apolitical by both those outside the organization and by its users” (Ridgely 7).

The apolitical nature of “family” and “family values” is what fortified the movement’s growth, as some ideal version of both those subjects exists across races, religions, genders, etc. Groups such as Orthodox Jews, Conservative Muslims, and African-American Catholics were enveloped in this mission because it is “capacious enough to accommodate Americans of differing theological orientations and political

commitments yet specific enough to provide a common vision for leaders, activists, and fellow travelers” (Dowland 609). Family provided unfounded political dexterity for Christian Right groups, as one leader from the Family Foundation states, “if it impacts the family in terms of its pocketbook, its future, or its culture, it is a family-impact issue” (Rozell and Wilcox 276). Many of the central organizations in the movement, such as Focus on the Family and The Family Research Council, have utilized “family” to obscure their political ends. Due to the benevolent impression that these institutional names give off and the information on seemingly benign topics like parenting and marriage that they provide members, there has been a level of trust afforded to these organizations from outsiders and insiders alike. However, they have pedaled overt homophobia through unfounded scientific claims and were able to build a substantial following before concerns were raised against these “family-oriented” media networks, social programs, and informational publications.

Within the evangelical fundamentalist strain, the umbrella of family values allowed these communities’ desires and concerns to pass as non-Christian to others outside of the movement while also reinforcing for those within the movement that their moral superiority and commitment was founded in Christianity or the Christian conception of what a family should look like. The Christian Right utilizes “two distinct political vocabularies” where inside the movements leaders can “highlight the primacy of God and mobilize believers using the language of faith” while in the public forum “they can recast their arguments to appeal to a larger array of citizens” (Klemp). Whether expressed with biblical language or not, the creation of a binary based on family matters

designated the Christian Right's family structure as righteous and those counter to its specific conception as deviant.

Imperative to the Christian Right is the treatment of the family unit as a microcosm of greater society, and thus the importance placed on its maintenance reflects a vision of reproducing that model in order to craft a more Christian nation. According to the religious right, a family grounded in the prescribed values of Christianity is one more likely to be orderly, virtuous, and God-like. Thus the association of the healthy family structure as an institution critical for nurturing civil obedience and general social order is formed. Part of the discourse of the Christian Right revolved around descriptions of gay sexual behavior as an "inherently *anarchic* impulse" and one that lacks "spiritual, as well as physical discipline" (Herman 82). Here it is evident that the criticism of the LGBTQ movement is founded in this tension between orderly and anarchic, and thus the fear of repercussions that this non-heteronormative structure might have on greater societal control by Christians. Ultimately, threaded throughout this entire linkage, is the utmost important role of the Christian family as the deliverer of great Americans whose values serve God.

Perhaps the issue most indicative of the struggle between the Christian Right and the LGBTQ movement for control over the family realm was same-sex marriage. According to the Christian Right, the execution of traditional family values is inseparable from the preservation of gendered roles and the institution of marriage as a binding relationship that can *only* exist between a man and a woman. The LGBTQ movement's push for same-sex marriage, in combination with its paralleled causes within the feminist movement, assaulted the Christian formula for "successful" families on two

fronts. It was the task of Christian Right organizations such as Focus on the Family to portray “rigid roles for men and women within the family as the common sense, default positions embedded in the country’s traditions rather than as newly manufactured roles created in response to the multiple cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s” (Ridgely 12). When the Christian Right constructed the male and female sexes as complementary, their roles in the family were made incomplete without the existence of the other. In this logic lies the movement’s aversion to same-sex marriage as it “prevents” each gender from fulfilling its position. In other words, “the concept of family values is rooted in an ideology of the control of sexuality,” and without this control of sexuality the family falls apart (Gilson 100).

Public education became another battleground between the LGBTQ movement and The Christian Right. The Christian Right, in structuring their argument against LGBTQ sensitive measures in schools, rely on the notion of “parental authority” and/or their commodification of civil rights and individual liberties rhetoric with the term “parent’s rights.” The existence of school clubs such as the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) along with legislative pushes towards including sexuality in anti-discrimination protocols within the school system prompted the Christian Right to reassert that the family is ultimately responsible for childrearing. In their view, the inclusion of these matters in school was equivalent with a state-sanctioned endorsement of homosexual behavior. The strategic positioning of family at the top of the hierarchy and public education as supplementary to this guidance, implicitly asserts knowledge production by the Christian family over that of the secular nation. Even further, it argues that “teaching of tolerance or value-neutrality regarding homosexuality is against the traditional moral training of

students in ‘American’ values,” with these programs as “counter to the proper function of public education” which provides for the moral order of society (Miceli 598). Victimhood is readily employed when discussing parents at the hands of the government and children or students at the hands of gay teachers and LGBTQ inclusive curricula.

The child’s dual role as a physical product of the family and a symbolic creation/inheritor of the state is played upon by the Christian Right. The child, similar to the family unit, can be used to evoke even greater moral outrage with even less rational argument against it. For Christian Right activists, protection of the child can be claimed as the ultimate driving factor underneath the overall goal of protecting the family. Implicit in their commitment to the child’s education and upbringing is the notion that it is a long-term investment for the nation’s prosperity, as a child raised on Christian values will live to embody them. Anita Bryant’s campaign “Save Our Children” (SOC) embodies manipulation of aspects within the family by religious conservatives to not only stoke irrational fears, but broaden the audience that is receptive to their ideological messages. The SOC campaign rejected the notion of letting gay individuals hold positions of power over children, citing their “propensity for pedophilia” and their “homosexual agenda” which relied on their “recruitment of children” due to the inability of same-sex couples to reproduce through traditional means (Dowland 626). The campaign was overwhelmingly supported by Black and Latinx communities primarily because the nature of the narrative focused on *saving* children rather than on biblical or scriptural justifications against gay rights (Dowland). Corruption of children by “predatory” ideologies in the LGBTQ movement becomes synonymous with corruption of the nation, again allowing for the connection of the movement to politically legitimate aims. Additionally, it allowed

for protection of children and homosexuals as pedophiles to “link gay rights with abortion and feminism as yet another example of the government’s attack on the family” (Dowland 627). Most importantly, it is repeatedly clear that the child is a significant political object because of the opportunities it provides Christian Right activists to structure their social issues in a way that demands government action on behalf of their cause.

While the rhetoric of the movement in recent years has largely shifted away from “family values” and has instead focused on “religious freedom” and “individual liberties,” it is important to see this as a continuation of the Christian Right’s strategy of adapting language so as to make their message digestible for those beyond their Christian base. This tactic has remained effective for legitimizing their religious endeavors under a rational, secular framework by using subjects or phrases that are hard to argue against and often embedded in American political discourse already. While this change seems like a non-linear evolution of their original tactics, the very calls for religious freedom “preserves a heterosexism derived from antecedent family values politics” and “obscures a persistent social conservative commitment to using the state to enshrine the heteronuclear family” (Howell). Their agenda remains fixated on a singular path forward for America, one that revolves around the constant struggle of power and control between white, Christian evangelists and the increasingly secular, LGBTQ aware nation. In the same way that “love the sinner, hate the sin” has allowed the Christian Right to simplify and beautify their harmful messaging, the use of “family values” is yet another unassuming tactic with profound implications in the social and political spheres.

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