

From "Gay is Good" to the Scourge of AIDS: The Evolution of Gay Liberation Rhetoric, 1977-1990



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The capacity to get free is nothing; the capacity to be free, that is the task.

ANDRE GIDE, *THE IMMORALIST*

These words of Gide are given voice by Michel, who is beginning a narrative describing his awakening to his homoerotic desires and, more generally, to the joys of life and sensuality. Though the statement evinces a universal wisdom that places it beyond the claim of any single group, it is very nearly prophetic as a description of the course of gay liberation efforts in the United States over the last two decades. What began in the early 1970s in the giddy rush by a newly radicalized movement to *get free* is now absorbed in the unglamorous and often disheartening struggle to *be free* in a hostile environment. The rhetoric of gay liberation in the United States from 1977, the beginning of Anita Bryant's Save Our Children campaign, to its current concerns over AIDS is an important source of data in our efforts to understand rhetorical movements dealing with sociopolitical and rhetorical constraints. It forms a critical and as yet unchronicled chapter in the rhetorical history of a significant American social movement.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

As Suzanne Riches and Malcolm Sillars suggest, students of rhetoric and related studies widely agree that the longitudinal, comprehensive study of a social movement is the paradigmatic ideal.¹ Such studies have the potential to provide fundamental insights into relationships between rhetoric and history, between rhetoric and its antecedents, among competing rhetorics within a movement, and among opposing rhetorics. The perspective is evolutionary; it emphasizes rhetorical change, an element that is essential to the very definition of movement.

For all these advantages, though, and for all our commitment to such a model, we have few studies of the kind described.² They are, as Judson Crandell noted in proposing them more than forty years ago, "cumbersome."³ The undertaking of the comprehensive study of a rhetorical movement may be the scholarly equivalent of triathletic training, an act of overall stamina as much as skill in any particular event. The critic must sift through discourses that may span years or even decades, that may emanate from a staggering array of organizations and individual rhetors, resulting in a polyglot that somehow must be represented adequately and typified. For historical movements, those that have run their course, the critic must decide when they began and when they ended. To what extent must the antislavery rhetoric of the American Revolution be comprehended in a study of abolitionism or abolitionism in a study of the modern black civil rights movement? Does women's

liberation begin in the 1960s, or is it continuous with the suffrage movement of the nineteenth century? Which, if any, among these movements might be said to have ended? Ongoing movements demand the critic's continuing attentions, at least periodically; they refuse to be fossilized and retired to the display case.

And for all this effort, the rewards may be unsatisfying, especially if we take the view represented by those such as Hart who believe the primary goal of our scholarship should be theory building. Many of these studies will be part of the slow, steady accretion of confirming evidence for some large hypothesis, a journeyman's labors.⁴ Yet while the emphasis may be on those who create the hypotheses and those who fail to find confirmation, meaningful generalization in this decidedly social-scientific model is not the product of any single study, no matter how competent or careful. The researcher's effort is interpretable only as part of the aggregate.

Removed from the requirements of theory building, the energy required merely to characterize the data for these studies may force their authors to content themselves with achieving accurate and precise description, a kind of rhetorical chapter to a book someone else will edit.

This case study is offered as a kind of second chapter in a continuing rhetorical chronicle of the gay liberation movement in the United States. This chapter, which examines gay liberation rhetoric from 1977 to 1990, is an addition to an earlier study that examined the rhetoric of this movement from its 1948 inception as a sustained movement for social reform in the United States to 1977 when the study was completed.⁵ This ongoing effort might be justified by the uniqueness and inherent worthiness of the body of discourse,⁶ and I have argued elsewhere that the rhetoric of gay liberation is unique in being perhaps the most thoroughly postmodern of reform discourses.⁷

Conversely, this effort might be justified, as suggested above, by its potential contribution to our understanding of the rhetorical behavior of social movements and of rhetoric in general: The gay liberation movement in the United States may be especially useful for theory-building studies. It has no confusing antecedents; it has a well-defined point of origin; it is of short enough duration that we can make a relatively complete inventory of its organizations, publications, and spokespeople; and there are significant archives containing rich rhetorical records. It is, in short, like Sprague-Dawley or Whistar rats, possessed of a kind of purity that allows researchers to discount confounding variables in explaining observed interactions and effects.

On the basis of the characteristics of the movement and of data that represent coverage of more than forty years of rhetorical history (a combination of this study with the earlier study that ended in 1977), the final section of this essay presents some tentative conclusions with respect to what Andrews has identified as the "real questions" confronting the student of rhetorical movements: "What circumstances *stimulate* rhetorical behaviors? And what rhetorical behaviors are *chosen* within the range of behavioral possibilities?"⁸ Even tentative answers to these questions may seem to argue against the uniqueness of any one movement. Still, definitive conclusions about what might be extrapolated from the discourse to social movements in general and conclusions regarding the unique features of this rhetoric depend equally on an accumulation of studies "examining in detail the *rhetorical progression* of particular historical movements."⁹ For the moment, we must content ourselves with a modest contribution to rhetorical history, a necessary building block in the

"foundation for mature, empirically grounded theory,"¹⁰ an investment whose theoretical dividend awaits the accumulation of case studies such as this one.¹¹

CATALYTIC EVENTS AND RHETORICAL MOVEMENTS

The rhetorician who studies social movements diachronically must find grounds for talking about rhetorical periods or eras, that is, eras in which discourses exhibit both significant distinctiveness from others occurring in adjacent periods and some central defining concerns within. In a too-little-appreciated essay, Joe Munshaw offers a helpful starting point for articulating relationships between time and discourse. "To succeed in adopting a process viewpoint for structuring his studies," writes Munshaw, "the rhetorical historian must develop a clear conceptualization of the relationship of time to history and rhetoric."¹² Munshaw's enterprise involves looking at history as change in public discourse instead of as a series of events punctuated by wars, changes of government, and technological innovations.

The rhetorical historian's unique contribution lies in the development of structures that treat history as rhetoric. Sometimes structures borrowed from other types of historians adequately serve his purposes of analysis and explanation. Often, however, the rhetorical historian will need to develop his own structures because the questions he hopes to ask are different from those of other historians.¹³

The Cold War era, for example, would be a useful designator for a large-scale rhetorical analysis of the evolution of U.S. foreign policy. Its usefulness would be determined not by its conformity to divisions that historians have used to divide time, but by its ability to define a distinct era in the history of American foreign policy discourse. Again citing Munshaw: "Events belong in a period because of their similarity. When events change drastically, usually the historian perceives that a new period different from the older period is created."¹⁴ In many, perhaps most, cases, there will be no predetermined categories for the rhetorical scholar, and the problem becomes one of isolating natural divisions in the unfolding of discourse over time.¹⁵

Clearly, one key to identifying natural divisions in discourse is when situations and exigencies change dramatically. Toward that end, I have developed a methodology around *catalytic events* as useful markers of rhetorical eras and partitions for rhetorical sampling. Catalytic events are moments in the life of a movement that provide the appropriate conditions for discourse. As such, they are events that (1) are historical rather than rhetorical, (2) are nontactical (either extraneous to the movement in origin, spontaneous in origin, or both), (3) achieve tremendous significance for the movement, and (4) precede rhetorical responses that constitute demonstrably discrete, internally homogeneous rhetorical eras.¹⁶ There can be little doubt, for example, that colonial rhetoric changed substantially after the Boston massacre. Similarly, abolitionist rhetoric changed after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska act, labor rhetoric after the outbreak of the two world wars, black rights rhetoric after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, women's liberation rhetoric after the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and gay liberation rhetoric as a result of AIDS. Each of these is only one example within its respective movement.

The complete rhetorical study of a movement would chart its entire history with respect to such events. Even when considering *social movement* as meaning rather than a phenomenon, there must be some sense of stages in the progression of meaning, and those stages must be marked by some conceptual device.

CATALYTIC EVENTS AND THE RHETORIC OF GAY LIBERATION, 1977-1990

The identification of catalytic events is a problem in criticism in the same way that the identification of relevant features of discourse is a problem in criticism. The critic must bring all he or she knows about rhetoric, social movements, and the movement being considered to the problem of identifying catalytic events. In this case, and in its antecedent, the hypothesis was forwarded that particular events provided meaningful divisions in the discourse. That hypothesis was tested statistically, and the results were supportive.

As a conceptual device, catalytic events (in this case the ones isolated) provide meaningful divisions that aid the critical task. As Lucien Goldmann puts it, though structures are realities, they also are concepts of research; structure "originates from the solution of practical problems encountered by living beings."¹⁷ In the final analysis, the evaluation of any particular structure and of all criticism must be pragmatic. "Is this understanding helpful and useful?" That is the proper question. As Goldmann goes on to remark, with each problem we solve through the imposition of structure, the structures themselves are adapted a little, and we thus renounce the possibility of an ideal solution.¹⁸

In the forerunner of this study, seven catalytic events and five significant rhetorical periods were identified in the gay liberation movement in the United States.¹⁹ The first period in the life of the movement, which followed the publication by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, was primarily organizational. Whatever discourses may have been produced were likely for in-group consumption, were primarily social in content, and had few vehicles for preservation. Consequently, there is little evidence of rhetorical activity in this earliest period of the movement's history. The first significant rhetorical period for the U.S. gay liberation movement, characterized as *establishing groundwork*, corresponded roughly to the time of Joe McCarthy's political prominence from 1950 to 1954. This was followed by a period characterized as *educating and encouraging* in the aftermath of the censure and decline of McCarthy and the near simultaneous publication of a model penal code in which, among other reforms, homosexual acts between consenting adults were decriminalized. In 1961, Illinois became the first state in the United States to adopt, essentially unchanged, the American Law Institute's Model Penal Code and Franklin Kameny, after losing a discrimination case that went to the Supreme Court, was inspired to create the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C. In the wake of these catalytic events, the gay liberation movement achieved a period characterized as a move *toward strength and independence*. This third rhetorical era lasted until 1969 when a New York City riot now known as the Stonewall rebellion ushered in a period of *aggressive self-identity*, a rhetorical stance characterized by offensive strategies and activism that, in about 1973, gave way to a period characterized as *uncertain maturity*. The original study ended at the point at which discourse began in response to a 1977 Dade County, Florida, referendum. In that referendum, voters rescinded an ordinance passed by the county board

prohibiting discrimination against gay people in housing, employment, and public accommodations. Anita Bryant was the key opposition figure, and in retrospect, it seems clear that for several years thereafter the gay rights movement was put in a defensive position as it focused on referendum battles over similar ordinances across the country.²⁰

The current study, then, begins with the era catalyzed by Anita Bryant and posits two additional catalytic events and corresponding rhetorical eras. The referendum campaigns inspired by Bryant held public attention and were the primary preoccupation of the gay rights movement from 1977 to 1980. By 1980 and the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, the intensity of combat had lessened, and the movement's devil figures became more diverse and amorphous. Anita Bryant was replaced by Jerry Falwell, the Moral Majority, neoconservatism, and right-wing evangelicalism in general. Many of the concerns remained the same, but the style changed considerably. Finally, by 1983, two years after the *New York Times* reported the original story on a rare form of cancer being found in homosexual men, AIDS and the medical, political, and social threats it poses had come to color all gay discourse. Indeed, the underlying thesis of more than one text (including the recent and acclaimed film "Longtime Companion") has been that AIDS, in essential ways, has changed the meaning of what it is to be gay in the United States. As one figure in Rosa von Praunheim's film trilogy "AIDS Update" says when asked about the impact of AIDS on gay life, "Everything has changed."

As in the original study, discussion is focused by the findings of a value analysis of selected samples of discourse with attention usually limited to the five most frequently coded value appeals in each period.²¹

Period VI: Defending Fragile Achievements

By 1977, *homophile liberation* had been a presence in America for thirty years, the visible and activist post-Stonewall wing of the movement for nearly a decade. In the congenially liberal afterglow of an era in which popular political action had ended American involvement in an unpopular war and brought down two U.S. presidents, gay liberationists began to talk with pride of their achievements and of the increasing social and legal acceptance of homosexuality. Everything seemed positive for the movement, but then Dade County, Florida, passed an ordinance prohibiting discrimination against homosexuals in housing, employment, and public accommodations. In this environment of sunny tolerance, the surprise was the vocal, religiously fueled popular reaction against the ordinance led by singer Anita Bryant, a reaction that resulted in a referendum battle that reached far beyond Dade County.

Bryant's successful campaign against the Dade County ordinance and its expansion into the nationwide Save Our Children movement served notice on the gay community that history did not have an immutable, liberal-progressive direction, that it could not be trusted simply to run its course. From 1973 until Bryant's emergence, the gay liberation movement had been in a stage characterized as uncertain maturity. The dramatic gains of the early seventies had given way to quiet lobbying such as letter writing, the mundane processes of conventional political influence carried out by groups like the National Gay Task Force. Many gay people had lost interest; organizations atrophied; no credible devils existed to threaten the peace; and the *movement* was threatened with dissolution. Then a series of events beginning with the battle in Dade County served as a sobering antidote to complacency.

