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Fred Fejes' Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality (book review)

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REVIEW: Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Between the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the outbreak of AIDS in the early 1980s, the gay movement in the United States achieved a number of successes. More than thirty municipalities and over a dozen large corporations banned discrimination against gay people; the first openly gay politicians were elected to public office; and the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its manual of mental disorders. But it was a resounding *defeat* of gay rights that marked the movement's coming-of-age.

In 1977, singer and born-again Christian Anita Bryant successfully led a campaign in Dade County, Florida, to repeal an ordinance prohibiting discrimination on the basis of "sexual preference." Fixating on a single context – classrooms – Bryant's organization, called "Save Our Children," framed the law as an endorsement of immorality and a license for homosexual "recruitment." Dade County's gay activists, divided as they were between the sexual-liberationist Miami Victory Campaign and the traditionally liberal Coalition for Human Rights, proved no match for Save Our Children, whose rhetoric capitalized on the public's deep antipathy to homosexuality and its profound ignorance of actual homosexuals.

Other than Bryant's own memoir, rushed to publication months after her victory,¹ Fred Fejes' *Gay Rights and Moral Panic* (2008) is the first book devoted primarily to this pivotal moment in American history. Let us hope that it is not the last.

Fejes offers a detailed chronicle of the course and local context of Bryant's 1977 "crusade" (her word) and useful summaries of six gay-rights referenda the following year. Only the most patient readers, however, will follow Fejes long enough to appreciate his scrupulous review of relevant press coverage and his impressive array of interviews with key players on both sides. Quite simply, the book fails to weave its abundance of valuable information into a readable narrative. The prose is colorless, sometimes confusing, and often downright careless. A total absence of illustrations – despite the author's focus on media representations, and the easy availability of telltale photographs, cartoons, and campaign paraphernalia – only exacerbates the book's failure to echo any of the excitement generated by the events themselves.²

Worse, the factual accuracy and thorough research that characterize Fejes' account of the Miami referendum do not extend to his treatment of larger historical problems. Certain errors are patent, like his suggestion that World War II "resulted in the first major effort to define and examine homosexuality as a problem." More often, though, the book stumbles on questions of cause and effect. A tendency to see the media as always generating rather than reifying popular conceptions leads Fejes to dubious conclusions; he insists, for example, that the media was the major "source" of Americans' "common sense knowledge" about homosexuality, and he specifically discounts religion's influence simply because most denominations were not terribly

¹ Anita Bryant, *The Anita Bryant Story: The Survival of Our Nation's Families and the Threat of Militant Homosexuality* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1977).

² For an excellent compilation of such images, see "Days Without Sunshine: Anita Bryant's Anti-Gay Crusade," available at <http://www.stonewall-library.org/anita/panel2.html> (last accessed 29 August 2009). The text accompanying the exhibit is derived from a thesis written by this reviewer.

vocal on the subject prior to 1977. Later, Fejes identifies in the late 1970s a shift in “cultural norms and public opinion,” a turn from increasing “social acceptance” of gay people to “a form of quasi-stigmatized tolerance.” Here and throughout the book, Fejes wrongly interprets backlash to betoken a reversal of popular sentiment. In fact, it was not until 1977 that most Americans even confronted homosexuality as a political issue; campaigns like Save Our Children’s did not change people’s minds about gay rights so much as they allowed existing hostility to express itself.

Yet, as Fejes’ subtitle rightly proclaims, the Miami referendum did inaugurate a new era in American politics. Preceding by one year Jerry Falwell’s establishment of the Moral Majority, Bryant’s crusade was a signal event in the emergence of grassroots religious conservatism, which had been quietly gaining strength throughout the previous decade. Miami proved that homosexuality was one issue by which conservatives could reach moderates and even liberals. As Fejes notes, Florida’s rejection of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1977 – for fear, in part, of constitutionally mandated same-sex marriage – was as powerful a lesson in homophobia’s political potential as Bryant’s two-to-one victory in Miami. But Fejes passes over conservatives’ persistent use of referenda since 1977 to thwart gay legislative gains, just as he ignores their prior use of that tactic in local battles over school prayer and busing. Indeed, the book barely glances at the development of fundamentalist politics up to 1977. A substantial analysis of Bryant’s own biography and career, including the seven faith-based books she authored between 1970 and 1976, might have mitigated somewhat the book’s neglect of relevant historians like Mary C. Brennan, George Marsden, and Lisa McGirr. Fejes also fails to notice Bryant’s constant reference to “special rights,” one of conservatives’ most effective antigay refrains from 1977 onward; and though he notes the founding of Anita Bryant Ministries in 1978, he misses this event’s significance to the development of Christian reparative therapy and the rise of the ex-gay movement.

Such omissions might not be so frustrating if *Gay Rights and Moral Panic* did not purport to describe “the origins of America’s debate on gay rights.” The book does better in this regard when Fejes focuses specifically on the gay movement. It makes a respectable case that “Hurricane Anita,” as it was called in some circles, carried many gay people out of the closet, brought lesbians and gay men into stronger alliance, and helped forge a truly national community. But it glosses over the lesson – perhaps the Bryant crusade’s most significant – so powerfully articulated months later by San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk. “In 1977,” Milk proclaimed, “gay people had their rights taken away from them in Miami.” But in the weeks before and after the referendum, “the word ‘homosexual’ or ‘gay’ appeared in every single newspaper in this nation, ... on every radio station, on every TV station, and in every household. ... In those two weeks, more good and bad, but *more* about the word homosexual was written than probably in the history of mankind. ... In 1977, we saw a dialogue start.”³

This is where the real media story lies. For if the media has an especially important role in contemporary gay history, that is because gay people’s first and foremost challenge after Stonewall was the invisibility of the closet. It was this coerced absence from public view that Bryant fought to preserve – especially where children might see. “The major harm,” she said, “is

³ Harvey Milk, “The Hope Speech,” in Mark Blasius & Shane Phelan eds., *We Are Everywhere: A Historical Sourcebook of Gay and Lesbian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 451-452.

when a person wants to flaunt homosexuality, wants to be able to come out of the closet.”⁴ But Bryant’s celebrity brought unprecedented attention to the very subject she would have relegated to silence, and her crusade irrevocably hastened an era in which no gay person – including gay and proto-gay children – could long imagine that he or she was alone. In 1979, reflecting on “everything that has happened in the past few years,” *Time* magazine acutely identified the main import of such visibility: “Just hearing the word gay, reading it in a newspaper, seeing a gay person, real or fictional, on television – any of those things makes it easier for a person to come out.”⁵ In her way, Bryant was on to something.

Finally, Fejes’ study would be far more instructive about “the origins of America’s debate on gay rights” if it endeavored to describe this debate as it has developed in the past generation. Apart from a blanket and rather condescending classification of all antigay mobilizations as “moral panics,” however, Fejes does not specify what persists or what has changed since 1977. No doubt many observers would perceive – perhaps wishfully – more difference than continuity. Rhetoric about homosexual child molesters and seducers has all but disappeared as an explicit theme in antigay messaging to the mainstream; a vast majority of Americans now support equal employment and housing opportunities for gay people, while slighter majorities even favor some form of same-sex relationship recognition; and the ideological fractiousness of the gay movement has decreased altogether since 1977, while the movement’s size, savvy, and resources have vastly increased.

What is particularly stunning about Fejes’ failure to account for any of these shifts is the fact that Miami, the city he plausibly situates at the heart of the national gay-rights debate, itself provides a ready-made point of comparison between then and now. In 1998, the Miami-Dade County Commission reinstated nondiscrimination protections for gay people. Opponents of the ordinance immediately called for a referendum, and soon the “The Second Battle of Miami,” as *The New York Times* called it, was underway. In a prolonged campaign, embittered by the memory of 1977, Miami reenacted the struggle it introduced to the nation. And by a narrow margin of six percent, voters showed just how much had changed since “Hurricane Anita” swept through town.⁶

⁴ Frank Greve & Gerald Storch, “Anita Byant: Homosexuality Is a Sin,” *Tropic Magazine (The Miami Herald)*, 29 May 1977, pp. 6-13.

⁵ George Church, “How Gay Is Gay?,” *Time*, 23 April 1979, pp. 72-76.

⁶ “A Close Vote on Gay Rights,” *NY Times*, 3 December 1998, p. A30.