Original Article

God, gays and good-enough enemies

Cynthia Burack
Department of Women's Studies, 286 University Hall, 230 N. Oval Mall, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1311, USA.
E-mail: burack.1@osu.edu

Abstract Psychoanalytic social theorists who work in the relational tradition have analyzed the psychodynamics of enemy systems and identified persistent themes in the operation of these systems. Although enemy systems often involve enmity between ethnic, national or cultural groups, the psychodynamic symptoms of such systems are observable when social groups cast familiar outgroups as enemies. In contemporary American political discourse, Christian conservative leaders execute movement politics by linking gay people to terrorism and characterizing them as enemies of America. Sexual politics does not present a classic case of intergroup conflict of the sort usually investigated by psychoanalytic theorists. However, psychodynamic analyses of the intersections of religion, politics and sexuality hold great promise for explicating the domestic enmities that are situated at the center of American political life.
Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society (2009) **14,** 41–48. doi:10.1057/pcs.2008.43

Keywords: relational psychoanalysis; enemies; same-sex sexuality; Christian right; terrorism

An Enemy Within

Much psychoanalytic social thought has focused on the psychodynamics of enemy construction and the psychic needs that enemies satisfy: the 'need to have enemies and allies,' in Vamik Volkan's (1988) trenchant phrase. Prominent psychoanalytic investigations of enemies have examined these dynamics in workplaces and institutions as well as through such large-scale social, cultural and political phenomena as religion, nationalism and race/ethnicity. Scholars who use psychoanalysis to study political phenomena analyze the ways in which the coherence and nature of enemy groups often are constructed through group psychological responses to racial/ethnic, cultural, national/geographic identifications or combinations of these factors. For those experts, an important qualification of enemies is mutual animosity – a relationship in which each side creates its own identity through its enmity with, and disidentification from, the Other.

By contrast, psychoanalysis has often treated same-sex sexuality as a matter of individual, rather than group, psychology and of mental health rather than enemy systems. This treatment began with Freud's ambivalent theorizing of same-sex sexuality. As Roy Schafer (1995) points out, Freud denaturalized some facts that were relevant to psychoanalytic heterosexism and reinforced others, thus both challenging and bolstering the concept of homosexuality as an unnatural form of sexual and affectional orientation (p. 192). After Freud, a number of psychoanalysts took up the question of homosexuality and established the key points of antigay psychodynamic theory. Among them are Sándor Rado, Irving Bieber and Charles Socarides, a founder of the National Association for the Research and Therapy of Homosexuality. But arguments about the deficient mental health of lesbians and gay men did not only take place within the precincts of the mental health professions. By the 1970s and 1980s, antigay psychodynamic ideas had been absorbed into a literature that mixed Christian conservative moralizing and political attunement with developmental psychological theory (Drescher, 2002). In the contemporary psychoanalytic establishment, progressives point out the ways in which same-sex sexuality has recently occupied a position of stigma within the psychoanalytic profession as well as in the larger society (Domenici and Lesser, 1995).

Psychoanalytic social theorists who work in the relational tradition have identified empirical signs and criteria of enemy systems at work, including struggles over geographic borders (actual or fantasized) and mutual antagonism (Volkan *et al*, 1990, 1991). These processes characterize many episodes of group enmity; yet if these criteria function as *de facto* signs of the presence of enemy systems, we are likely to miss many manifestations of such systems and the kinds of psychodynamic processes that precipitate and maintain them. The criterion of mutual animosity may be particularly limiting. As Leon Wieseltier (2001) points out, all groups that end up locked in relations of enmity do not demonstrate mutual and competitive hostility, and the assumption that they do constitutes a 'fiction of parity' (p. 447). Such fictions may animate conceptions of moral, as well as psychological, equivalence rather than starting from the empirical facts of particular sites of enmity.

To broaden a relational perspective on enemies, we can add to what is essentially a political-science perspective on conflict between contending groups and nations, a sociological perspective on stigmatized outgroups, among which are such consistent contenders as the poor, immigrants, the diseased or mentally impaired, the gender deviant, sex workers and homosexuals. A traditional political approach to enemies that relies on geographic borders and mutual antagonism is likely to miss that in certain circumstances outgroups can become enemies. In fact, whether the objects of enmity begin as groups locked in mutual enmity with some contending national, cultural or ethnic Other or as collectivities stigmatized by some politically or culturally dominant group, the psychodynamic processes consistent with enemy systems may be present. When

it comes to outgroups, enemy processes are likely to be stimulated particularly in times of social stress or when members of outgroups forcefully contest the terms of their stigmatized status.

In his psychoanalytic analysis of geopolitical enemy systems, Howard Stein (1990) uses two slightly different conceptual terms to explicate the nature of enemy relations and their intragroup and intrapsychic correlates: 'good enough' and 'indispensable' enemies. For Stein, the Cold War Soviets were America's 'indispensable enemy;' this relationship exemplifies the importance of symmetry, including 'psychological "fit"' and historical 'fateful equivalences' among national foes (pp. 74–75). This construction can account for many group antagonisms, including the one in which the United States and other Western nations are currently engaged with formally stateless – although still culturally and regionally identifiable – Islamist radicals. Stein's alternative appellation, however, provides a slightly different perspective on threats. I argue here that a good-enough enemy need not be recognizable for its separate juridical, jurisdictional or originary status. Such an enemy – especially an enemy 'within' – can produce and manifest the hazardous psychodynamic phenomena that we usually associate with external adversaries is an important insight for relational theorists to remember as they analyze the intersections of religion and sexuality.

A Good-Enough Enemy

Stein's formulation of the 'good-enough enemy' is a useful one for investigating the use of enemy rhetoric and the cultivation of enemy status by American Christian conservatives against lesbians and gay men. Stein (1987) argues that to be a good-enough enemy, a group must be 'a separate object that is used as a reservoir to store and absorb all of one's own negated elements' (pp. 188–189). This issue of separateness, and how groups discursively establish their distinction from other groups, is an important one. Boundaries between the groups 'gay' and 'Christian' (or 'Christian conservative') are ideological, not geographic, in kind. As such, they must be carefully maintained by Christian conservative doctrine and ingroup rhetoric. Christian conservative leaders insist that the categories 'Christian' and 'gay/homosexual' are mutually exclusive. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender/transsexual (LGBT) people identify and worship as Christians, although the possibility of the juxtaposition of these identities is constantly abjured by the Christian right as a matter of principle (Josephson and Burack, 2006; Burack, 2008).

In Christian-right ideology, same-sex attracted (SSA) people who struggle against their same-sex desire can be Christian, but those who live as gay cannot be – their lives are an affront to the Gospel and proof that they cannot have been saved and inducted into the Kingdom of Heaven. This boundary between the

two identities is accomplished in part by rehearsing biblical prohibitions against same-sex sexual behavior, of course. But it is also accomplished by redefining 'activism' such that those who live their same-sex sexuality rather than disclaiming it are redefined as 'gay activists' even if they do not take part in any activities understood in public discourse to be 'political.' Hence, having same-sex relationships or participating in gay cultural events constitutes forms of gay activism that, for Christian conservatives, solidify the psychological boundaries between the two groups – gay *activists* cannot be Christian – and contribute to the status of gay *people* as members of an enemy group (Burack, 2008, pp. 78–79).

One issue complicates the definition of LGBT people as enemies and not only as members of a stigmatized group: the fact that many young Christian conservatives come to understand themselves as 'SSA' and 'strugglers' – ex-gay movement terms for those who, as a result of developmental dynamics beyond their control, experience desire for members of their own sex and then struggle against those desires and seek help in resisting them. Although it is open to any who are willing to embrace its theology and modes of therapy, the ex-gay movement exists primarily to serve SSA, born-again Christians, their families and the ministries in which they participate (Erzen, 2006). Besides its stated purpose of assisting 'SSA' Christians to resist their same-sex desires and become heterosexual, the ex-gay movement thus serves the purpose of policing the boundary between Christians (SSA though they may be) and non-Christians (the unregenerate against whom enemy feeling and rhetoric will be directed).

'Enemy' is always a sliding signifier that serves cultural and group psychological needs alike. In the US context, Nazis, communists/socialists or terrorists are or have been enemies; and particular groups may be equated with these enemy ideal types to summon specific kinds of fears: the erasure of particular forms of individuality, engulfment by the state, genocide or state violence, threats to religious freedom or to cultural particularity or anxieties about the return of projected disgust and malice.

It is common, for example, for groups in American politics to refer to their adversaries as Nazis, an appellation that can connote the will to genocide or antidemocratic behavior, especially the aspiration to overturn majoritarian consensus by force. Christian-right elites employ the comparison between LGBT people and Nazis in stressful situations, including during political campaigns and when LGBT people successfully use the political process to achieve the recognition of some right. Although he is not alone, Pat Robertson (1993) has been prolific in linking gays with Nazis: 'many of those people involved with Adolph Hitler were Satanists, many of them were homosexuals – the two things seem to go together.' Similarly, James Dobson (2004), child psychologist and founder of the prominent national Christian-right organization Focus on the Family, equates Nazis and LGBT people throughout *Marriage Under Fire*,

his polemic against same-sex marriage. A chapter titled, 'How Did We Get in This Mess?' begins with the phrase, 'When Nazi Germany marched its troops into Austria' (p. 29). Later, Dobson grounds the comparison in the enemy's aggression, which, left unchecked, is devastating for any society that must confront it: '[T]his is why we are in the state of peril that faces our nation today. Like Adolf Hitler, who overran his European neighbors, those who favor homosexual marriage are determined to make it legal, regardless of the democratic processes that stand in their way' (p. 41). A favorite trope of many Christian conservatives is that of 'appeasement,' in which the early British response to Nazi aggression is compared to contemporary social tolerance of lesbians and gay men.

Today, linkages between gays and terrorism have not replaced earlier rhetorics linking gay people with Nazis (or communists); rather, all these forms of rhetoric coexist, invoked in different contexts and with different audiences to mobilize and precipitate the splitting and projective defenses that characterize enemy systems. The link between same-sex sexuality and terrorism did not originate in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, although it has become more common since the events of that day. For example, in 1998, Pat Robertson made the connection in a broadcast of his *700 Club* television program. Addressing himself to the Orlando, Florida, gay pride parade and the controversy of 'gay days' at Disneyland, Robertson predicted that 'terrorist bombs' would be a likely consequence of American tolerance of same-sex sexuality (People for the American Way, 1998). Such a narrative becomes more resonant in the age of anti-American terrorism.

One example helps to illustrate both the usefulness of the trope of terror and the anxieties about audience and effect that comes with the political territory. In 2003, a news article from Concerned Women for America (CWA) commented on the attempt of a recently wed gay Canadian couple to enter the United States as married. The article referred to the couple as the 'latest pair of domestic terrorists' and linked the men's attempt to enter the United States using a single customs form to the porousness of American's borders to potential terrorists. The language of the article in CWA intern James Kimball's, 'Homosexuals Pose New Threat to US Border Security,' was widely reported by progressive news and information sources. Five days after the original article appeared on its website, CWA amended it to remove the language equating the gay men with terrorists. The freshly scrubbed article, '"Gay" Activists Not Allowed to Enter US as Married Couple,' was published on the CWA website (Kimball, 2003).

Besides linking lesbians and gay men with Nazism, James Dobson is also preoccupied with the threat of terrorism. Dobson (2004) offers his perspective that the goal of defending the boundaries of heterosexual marriage is more important than prosecuting the war on terror. He thus manages to link terrorism and same-sex sexuality for his readers while elevating the status of homosexual enemies above that of conventional terrorist enemies (p. 85). In his Focus on the

Family mailings, Dobson entrenches the connection between terrorism and same-sex sexuality and sexual rights, using the language of 'cultural terrorism' that is widely disseminated in the movement. It is especially striking that gay people who marry in jurisdictions where that choice exists, or who express support for same-sex marriage, are frequently vilified as enemy-activists. Not the goal of marrying, but the goal of destroying the institution of marriage itself is imputed to them.

More recently, Oklahoma state legislator Sally Kern (R) spoke to a group of supporters about the threats facing the United States. The transcript of this session is available because one attendee recorded the talk and posted the audio to 'YouTube.' It is consistent with the kind of enemy rhetoric that issues from Christian conservative leaders, a group that includes some ministers, activists and high-profile representatives of Christian-right organizations. In the session with her constituents, Kern (2008) said

> The homosexual lifestyle is destroying this nation … . I honestly think it's the biggest threat our nation has, even more so than terrorism or Islam, which I think is a big threat, ok?… You know gays are infiltrating city councils … . If you've got cancer or something in your little toe, do you say well, you know, I'm just gonna forget about it because the rest of me's fine? It spreads, ok? And this stuff is deadly and it's spreading, and it will destroy our young people, and it will destroy this nation.

On rare occasions, when ingroup speech of this sort is broadcast to a larger audience, many Americans are shocked at the antipathy they hear as well as the invocations of feared enemies in discourse about sexual minorities. Such speech, however, is anything but rare; rather, it is reserved for ingroup settings where antigay Christian conservatives can speak freely, mobilize group defenses and provide 'suitable targets of externalization' (Volkan *et al*, 1990, p. 31).

For the Christian right today, lesbians and gay men continue to be 'good-enough enemies.' Listen to Christian conservative leaders speak to followers and you will hear the inversion of all that the movement upholds as the central, distinguishing characteristics and aspirations of its own group: in place of godliness, godlessness; in place of monogamous holy matrimony, perverse and loveless sexuality; in place of decency, the repudiation of virtue; in place of protecting the vulnerable, exploiting the innocent; in place of meekness, political will-to-power and the desire to destroy Christian America. Gay people are not the *only* enemy, of course, but for many Americans they are as good as the radical Islamists who currently occupy the position of external enemy for Western political leaders and citizens.

It is possible that many of the differences that separate LGBT people from Christian conservatives are, indeed, minor differences. Even so, lesbians and gay men are inextricably connected to terrorists and terrorism by a set of narratives

that equate the two groups through metaphor, metonym and the common Satanic origins of all major foes, as well as by an eschatology that understands terrorist attacks as fit punishment for the putative American sin of tolerance for sexual minorities (Burack, 2008, pp. 101–133). As political commentators elucidate the public consequences of antigay fervor, psychoanalytic theorists can help us understand the psychodynamic processes that constitute the internal workings – both group and individual – of an enmity that sits right at the center of our politics.

About the Author

Cynthia Burack is Associate Professor in the Department of Women's Studies at The Ohio State University. In 2005, she received the Gradiva Book Award in Historical, Cultural and Literary Analysis from the National Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis for *Healing Identities: Black Feminist Thought and the Politics of Groups* (Cornell University Press, 2004). Her most recent book is *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right*.

References

Burack, C. (2008) *Sin, Sex, and Democracy: Antigay Rhetoric and the Christian Right*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Dobson, J. (2004) *Marriage Under Fire: Why We Must Win This Battle*. Peabody, MA: Multnomah.

Domenici, T. and Lesser, R. (eds.) (1995) *Disorienting Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Reappraisals of Sexual Identities*. New York: Routledge.

Drescher, J. (2002) I'm your handyman: A history of reparative therapies. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Psychotherapy* 5: 5–24.

Erzen, T. (2006) *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Josephson, J.J. and Burack, C. (2006) Inside, Out, and In-Between: Sexual Minorities, the Christian Right, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. In: D.S. Gutterman and A.R. Murphy (eds.) *Religion, Politics, and American Identity: New Directions, New Controversies*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, pp. 247–265.

Kern, S. (2008) Transcript (Ace on Tech). http://www.ace-on-tech.com/2008/05/30/oklahoma-state-representative-homosexuality-is-destroying-this-nation-death-nail-for-this-country/, accessed 1 October 2008.

Kimball, J. (2003) 'Gay' activists not allowed to enter US as married couple, Concerned Women for America. http://www.cwfa.org/articledisplay.asp?id=4629&department=CWA&categoryid=family, accessed 23 September 2008.

People for the American Way. (1998) Right wing watch online, http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=3939, accessed 11 November 2001.

Robertson, P. (1993) *The 700 Club*. 21 January.

Schafer, R. (1995) The Evolution of My Views on Nonnormative Sexual Practices. In: T. Domenici and R. Lesser (eds.) *Disorienting Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Reappraisals of Sexual Identities*. New York: Routledge, pp. 187–202.

Stein, H.F. (1987) *Developmental Time, Cultural Space: Studies in Psychogeography*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Stein, H.F. (1990) The Indispensable Enemy and American–Soviet Relations. In: V. Volkan, D.A. Julius and J. Montville (eds.) *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships. Volume 1: Concepts and Theories*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, pp. 71–89.

Volkan, V. (1988) *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationships*. Northvale, NJ: Aronson.

Volkan, V.D., Julius, D.A. and Montville, J.V. (eds.) (1990) *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships, Vol. I: Concepts and Theories*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Volkan, V.D., Julius, D.A. and Montville, J.V. (eds.) (1991) *The Psychodynamics of International Relationships, Vol. II: Unofficial Diplomacy at Work*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.

Wieseltier, L. (2001) Washington Diarist: Righteous. In: A. Polonsky and J.B. Michlik (eds.) *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy Over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 440–449.