

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Tina Fetner**, *How the Religious Right Shaped Lesbian and Gay Activism*. Social Movements, Protest, and Contention Series, Volume 31. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 156 pp. \$US 22.50 paper (978-0-8166-4918-1), \$US 67.50 hardcover (978-0-8166-4917-4)

As I write this review, lesbian and gay Americans are celebrating the fortieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots. Though lesbian and gay organizing had been in the works for decades, many view the riots of 1969 as the birth of the modern movement for lesbian and gay rights. In the forty years since, the movement has made great strides. True, this happened in fits and starts, and many movement goals remain unattained, but those fighting for lesbian and gay rights have had many successes over these years, and American public opinion has liberalized significantly. This has happened in spite of a very well organized and well funded effort on the part of the religious right's antigay movement. In fact, Tina Fetner argues in her vital new book, some of this change may have occurred not in spite of, but *because of* these antigay efforts.

Within the field of social movements, there is limited empirical research on the interactions of movements that are in opposition to one another. Most of the research that does exist has concentrated on the issue of abortion, looking at how the pro-choice and pro-life movements have affected each other's tactics and outcomes. Tina Fetner's book is a welcome addition to this literature. It provides many interesting and sometimes surprising insights on how the antigay religious right movement affected the lesbian and gay movement. As suggested above, Fetner addresses this critical question: how has the lesbian and gay movement achieved so much in the face of the religious right's opposition? To address this question, Fetner tells a roughly chronological story: Anita Bryant in the 1970s, AIDS in the 1980s, the culture wars in the 1990s, and gay marriage today. For each of these, Fetner shows how the religious right affected the rhetoric, strategies, and successes of the lesbian and gay movement.

For example, Fetner empirically shows how the rhetoric of the lesbian and gay movement shifted once Anita Bryant's antigay movement entered the American scene in the mid 1970s. Prior to this antigay mobilization, the lesbian and gay movement literature (as represented by

materials Fetner found in movement archives) used an upbeat and educational “we” language. After Anita Bryant’s campaign, the movement turned to a much angrier “us versus them” rhetoric. Even if certain organizations were not directly affected by Anita Bryant’s activism, they still often strategically employed Bryant to show the threats faced by the lesbian and gay minority.

Fetner describes other effects. At the nexus between social movement theory and organizational theory, she partially credits the religious right’s hierarchical structure for the development of national, hierarchical, lesbian and gay organizations. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, she argues that the religious right has chosen the specific issues around which the lesbian and gay movement has had to mobilize, causing the lesbian and gay movement to play defense rather than offense. Fetner also credits the religious right for drawing attention to gay and lesbian issues. All of these effects are interesting and indeed deserving of attention. However, in contrast to the Anita Bryant chapter, Fetner does not employ a systematic empirical analysis to describe these effects. Instead, she slips into storytelling mode, drawing mostly on existing scholarly and journalistic accounts of the two movements. If someone is already familiar with these histories, the descriptions may become tedious at times, and they occasionally are repetitive. Fetner did conduct interviews with seven leaders from the lesbian and gay movement, but she brings them into the analysis only when they illustrate a particular point she is making.

The exciting ideas Fetner raises more than make up for these empirical shortcomings. The most intriguing moments are the ones in which she makes the counterintuitive argument that the religious right unwittingly contributed to positive social change for the lesbian and gay movement. Of course, she acknowledges, this does not apply to all of the effects she describes. The religious right’s ability to set the agenda can never be considered a good thing for the lesbian and gay movement. A perfect example of this was the religious right’s late-1990s revival of reparative therapy, to which the lesbian and gay movement was forced to respond rather than spend limited resources on other issues.

Fetner’s claims that by persistently keeping lesbian and gay rights in the public spotlight, the religious right has steadily moved public opinion in a liberalizing direction. To change people’s minds on an issue, she argues, this issue must first be *on* people’s minds. Prior to the 1970s, few had reason to consider lesbian and gay rights. The relatively small lesbian and gay movement did not have the resources to raise this awareness. However, the antigay movement did have these resources, and by using them, they kept the issue at the forefront of Americans’ minds. This

forced many Americans to consider for the first time how they felt about lesbian and gay rights. That is, for the first time people were *expected* to have an opinion on the issue. But why is this opinion increasingly more positive toward lesbian and gay rights? Fetner hesitates to make a causal connection here, but simply raising this possibility is a contribution, and illustrates a new way to think about movement/countermovement effects.

As any good book does, then, Fetner's book raises as many questions as it answers. It is clear that these two movements will remain in interaction for decades to come. Sociologists should heed Fetner's call for continued research on these fascinating interactions.

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