

Coming Out as Heterosexual: The Evangelical Subversion of 1990s Identity Politics and the Contemporary Quest for the Real Man

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Abstract:

This paper argues that the sexual discourses of contemporary Evangelicals in the US represent a move beyond the liberal democratic politics struggling for equal rights for different sexual identity groups. By *openly* standing by a heteronormative and male dominated form of social organization, Evangelicals aim to overthrow the current symbolic order based on a *hidden* heterosexual bias. I describe this move as the psychotic coming out as heterosexual, organized around the idea of a new man, the impossible norm of a real masculinity defined negatively which can be seen as a return to the Freudian primal father. I suggest that this new male figure escapes the logic of the Foucauldian-Butlerian understanding of power by standing in the short circuit of its functioning, thus getting a hold of a sinister agency beyond identity politics.

Key words: Evangelical Christianity, queer theory, liberal democracy, real man, psychoanalysis, sexuality

Heteroseksüelliğin İlanı: 1990'lar Kimlik Politikaları Tartışmalarının Evanjelikler Tarafından Tahribi ve Günümüzde Gerçek Erkek Arayışları

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Özet:

Bu makale, ABD'de günümüz Evanjeliklerinde cinsellik söylemlerinin, farklı cinsel kimlik gruplarının eşit haklar mücadelesini yürüten liberal demokratik politikaların bir adım sonrasına geçtiği savını tartışmaktadır. *Apaçık* bir şekilde heteronormative ve erkek egemen bir toplumsal örgütlenme örneği olan Evanjelikler *üstü örtük* heteroseksüel tarafgirliği üzerine kurulmuş bir sembolik düzeni alt etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu değişimi, Freudyen atababa imgesine bir dönüş olarak görülebilecek ve olumsuz bir anlamda tanımlanmış bir gerçek erilliğin imkansız bir normu olarak *yeni erkek* fikri etrafında inşa edilmiş psikotik bir heteroseksüellik ifşası olarak tanımlıyorum. Bu yeni erkek figürünün Foucauldcu ve Butlercı iktidar anlayışı çerçevesinden çıktığını ve işlevselliğinin sınırlı dairesinde kalarak, bir kimlik politikası oluşturmanın ötesinde, netameli bir aracılığı yerine getirdiğini öne sürüyorum.

Anahtar kelimeler: Evanjelik Hıristiyanlık, kuir kuramı, liberal demokrasi, gerçek erkek, psikoanaliz, cinsellik

Introduction

When American liberals think of Evangelicals and sex, they usually think of repression. They should think again, Dagmar Herzog suggests in her 2008 book *Sex in Crisis* where she identifies a surprising shift in the American Christian Right's discourses on sex, a turn away from prohibition towards what she calls "Christian pornography", the flaunting of the transgressive and even downright obscene aspects of one's heterosexuality. In this paper, while agreeing with Herzog's description of this move, I present it from a different, psychoanalytic perspective. I revisit pre-9/11 queer theory's critique of the heteronormative bias in liberal identity politics suggesting that something may have been lost in its contemporary, ostensibly more radical version that focuses on the attack of homonormativity and the repressiveness of the social symbolic order as such (Puar; Edelman). My emphasis is on the way in which Evangelicals, just like radical queers, also undermine today's liberal democratic consensus that officially provides sexual equality for all; they do this not by secretly enjoying its latent heteronormative bias but by bringing it out to the open so that it actually threatens the functioning of the reigning symbolic order already bent in their favor. I call this procedure heterosexual coming out which I examine in its fundamental asymmetry to similar performances involving sexual minorities which, I claim, still rely on universal symbolic institutions smoothly functioning in the background. Using Judith Butler's critique of gender identity as a starting point, I develop the concept of the heterosexual coming out as the blind spot of Butler's and Ernesto Laclau's politics of non-identity, arguing that such Evangelical performances are ultimately non-identitarian themselves as they are situated beyond universals, beyond the symbolic order, trying to resurrect the Freudian father of the primal horde in a new post-identitarian figure of the *real man*. I draw on Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic theory of the inherent transgression to understand the challenge they pose both to liberal identity politics and to a Butlerian-Laclauian critique of it. As the illustration of heteronormative coming

outs I present a series of rituals from different places of the contemporary American Evangelical Christian right that are connected not by a coherent ideology but by a common media strategy of attacking the traditional Oedipal father's authority for being ineffective in the late capitalist society of the spectacle.

From Homosexual Coming Out to the Politics of Non-identity

When liberals think of a “coming out”, they usually think of it as a procedure concerning homosexuals. Furthermore, the idea of some kind of isolated space, that of the closet is evoked where the person can come out *from* to the light of the public arena supposedly shared by all of us. Through this process, the liberal fable tells us, even those who don't share the sexual orientation of the majority can become fully fledged members of society by representing themselves, since, after all, we are all different and for that reason we all need to show to others who we really are to get recognized. It is the blind optimism of this doxa that Judith Butler already criticized in her *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* when she warned about the possible traps of gay and lesbian coming outs and their assumption of a fixed identity. She showed how every assertion of “this is what I am”, every disclosure of the “I” can work only through a radical exclusion, by concealing and repressing something through which process the “I” can gain clear boundaries. Coming out, she argued, in fact reproduces the closet as it relies on the space of being “in” that supports the triumphant being “out” (16).

This, of course, is an argument about the impossibility of fully assuming any identity. What makes the case of gay and lesbian coming outs more complicated, however, is the fact that homosexuality as an identity category has a history in modern liberal democracies of designating the unnatural opposite of the heterosexual norm. Or, as Butler put it in *Bodies That Matter*, heterosexual gender identity is formed through the disavowal of the same sex desire (235). For this reason, a gay or lesbian coming out involves the avowal of a prior

disavowal, leaving intact the ideological framework that designates gay or lesbian merely as a bad copy of its original: heteronormativity (“Imitation” 17). Someone with a gay or lesbian identity constituted this way will count only as a secondary citizen in the supposedly equal public space. Butler’s argument is also a good illustration of what in Ernesto Laclau’s terms can be called the double inscription of heterosexuality operating in the symbolic space of liberal democracy. It works both as a hegemonic universal (based on the exclusion of other sexualities) and as one of the particular identities in a series of apparent equivalences defined against this universal background. Crucially, it works as the norm, as the hidden background creating the illusion of equality between different sexualities only insofar as it remains hidden in its normative function. What remains invisible is how the contingent element of heterosexual identity effectively posits itself as the necessary guarantee of the very field that accepts multiple sexualities. Today’s sexually tolerant yet fundamentally heteronormative liberal democratic space is therefore only the latest manifestation of what Laclau calls universality based on the logic of incarnation where a particular element directly stands in for the universal. Such an idea goes back to the European universalism of the 19th century, where, he argues, “there was no way to distinguish between European particularism and the universal functions it was supposed to incarnate, given that European universalism had constructed its identity through the cancellation of the logic of incarnation and, as a result, of the universalization of its own particularism.” (Laclau 86).

For this reason, Butler, instead of the coming out, proposed the deconstruction of the hidden binary operating within the heteronormative universal. She argued that rather than silently accepting that homosexuality is just a copy, the task is to demonstrate how the seemingly original heterosexuality is already an imitation. What heterosexuals imitate, she claimed, is “a phantasmatic ideal of a heterosexual identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect” (“Imitation” 21). Since the construction of a fixed identity that would fully reach this ideal (a complete overlap between universal and

particular) always fails, the attempt has to be repeated again and again through a performance that, while sustaining the ideal, also exposes its vulnerability. On the positive side, it is precisely because “[all] gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original” (“Imitation” 21) that a different kind of community is possible, one based on the universal non-identity of its subjects. Or to use again Laclau’s formulation: “[this] universal is part of my identity insofar as I am penetrated by a constitutive lack—that is, insofar as my differential identity has failed in its process of constitution. The universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining it, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity.” (89). This doesn’t mean, however, that Laclau and Butler’s version of democracy would work without exclusions. For them, there is neither a subject, nor a social field without a set of exclusions already at work; without them, Butler argues, we would get an unlivable fullness of psychosis, a language without effective universals. *Real* equality always remains an unreachable ideal in this model. What we can do is to prevent any particular to fix the meaning of the universal, to become naturalized; we can make sure “that the hegemonic configuration is always open to contestation and change” (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 5-9).

To summarize, Butler argued against homosexual coming out because for her it remains stuck within the identity politics that sustains the liberal democratic political system which she sees “as an attempt to fix the meaning of equality within definite parameters”, among them the identity of heterosexuality (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 8). Her underlying assumption was that the original sin of politics as well as its worst possible degeneration is to yield to the temptation of a fixed identity, that is, the naturalization of a particular as the universal norm. She reproached both heterosexual and homosexual identity politics for the same reason, for leaving the hidden normative universal untouched in the background. What about, however, heterosexual gender performances that do not rely on such a hidden naturalization of a universal; ones that posit themselves neither for, nor against, but beyond the symbolic ideal of heterosexuality which they believe to be

ineffective? What about heterosexual performances that are so distrustful of the symbolic efficiency of heteronormative institutions that they rather take matters into their own hands and, paradoxically, defend their particular heterosexuality even against the symbolic order that is biased in their favor? I will refer to these cases as heterosexual coming outs, which, I claim, remain in the blind spots of Butler's theory, as well as of contemporary queer theory that focuses on the critique of homonormativity.

Coming Out As Heterosexual as a Challenge to the Politics of Non-Identity

Where, then, should we locate heterosexual coming outs? In their *Deconstructing Heterosexuality*, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson aimed to do this by pointing at a fundamental asymmetry between lesbian and heterosexual feminists in terms of their sexual identity. While lesbian feminists usually proudly embrace their lesbian identity, their heterosexual colleagues, they suggested, tend to deny that their sexual orientation has anything to do with their feminist politics. They prefer to think of their sexuality as fluid, one that is open to possible same-sex relationships even if they have lived all their life as heterosexuals. The authors criticized this attitude by arguing that such a "lack of reflexiveness is the privilege of power" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 149). They found putting lesbian and heterosexual feminists into a single category problematic since the latter could neutralize the struggle of the homosexuals claiming their oppressed identity. Therefore, they suggested, to regain this political potential, heterosexual feminists should distinguish themselves by "coming out" themselves. The problem is that the authors didn't really deal with any actual ritual of coming out as heterosexual that would be comparable to its homosexual version described by Butler; instead they only used the term metaphorically. Their primary example was that of "brave" heterosexual feminists who are decent enough to admit they are privileged (150). One can hardly call this coming out as it is performed more out of guilt than pride. The other

example involved a feminine man who in all his life was considered gay until he decided to come out of the closet to himself, that is, not in public (145). Thus the question remains: are there analogous practices to the homosexual coming out of the closet among heterosexuals, ones that involve a comparable dimension of pride performed in public? And if so, how does their politics relate to that of their homosexual counterparts?

To delineate what I understand by coming out as heterosexual, I turn to Slavoj Žižek's critique of Butler's theory of the heteronormative universal created through the disavowal of homosexuality. According to Žižek,

what universality excludes is not primarily the underprivileged Other whose status is reduced, constrained, and so on, but *its own* permanent founding gesture – a set of unwritten, unacknowledged practices which, while publicly disavowed, are nonetheless the ultimate support of the existing power edifice. The public power edifice is haunted also by its own disavowed particular obscene underside, by the particular practices which break its own public rule – in short, by its 'inherent transgression'. (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 217).

What Žižek draws attention to is that, paradoxically, a hegemonic universal doesn't simply exclude its competing particularities trying to elevate themselves to the place of universality but also *itself as particular*. In psychoanalytic terms we are dealing here with the gap between official symbolic (written) law and its supporting superego double of unwritten rituals, such as obscene misogynistic army chants, or the practice of married man visiting brothels where the heteronormative public law is suspended and transgressed precisely through an excessive performance of heterosexuality. According to Žižek, such a gap is necessary for any symbolic order to function, which means that besides the subject's attempt to construct her symbolic identity by accepting the normative interpellation we can also talk about the ideological practice of imaginary disidentification, involving the subject's

false illusion that she has escaped, tricked the call of the law that aimed to capture, identify her (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 103).

The question then becomes whether it is possible to avow *this* disavowal, to come out being proud of the very obscene rituals that the authority of the social doesn't allow us to express openly, while relying on them working in the background? It seems impossible as long as we move within the framework of the symbolic order in the Lacanian sense which is built on the structural necessity of such a gap between *real* and *symbolic*, a gap which is established upon a human being's entry into the common language, by giving up an imagined fullness of *real* enjoyment through the process of Oedipalization, or as Lacan puts it, symbolic castration (Lacan 575-585). In such a traditional social order, the public presentation of disavowed obscene practices of enjoyment can break the smooth functioning of the symbolic, making power—imagined as the manifestation of the Oedipal father—embarrassed, so to speak. This is how one can explain the initial effectivity of a movement like Queer Nation in the early 90s. Their slogans such as “I praise God with my erection” (qtd. in Berlant and Freeman 205) could be subversive precisely because they touched upon the obscene rituals within heteronormative religious practices, or, to put it bluntly, they exposed the fact that Christians themselves already had been praising God with their erections (as in the well-known cases of institutionally constructed pedophilia in the Catholic Church) which made their calling homosexuality obscene hypocritical. Such a critical procedure is very much in line with the Laclauian-Butlerian politics of non-identity; it reveals the disavowed particular dimension that supports the universal claims of the ruling symbolic while proposing a different, more constructivist relation to the very same universality. However, as Dagmar Herzog suggests looking at contemporary American Evangelical discourses on sex, during the last couple of decades another form of power has been emerging that seems to be immune to such shaming attempts as it situates itself beyond the traditional symbolic order.

Evangelical Sex: Towards the Real Man

Contrary to the common belief of liberals, one cannot really say that Evangelicals are anti-sex, at least not since the mid-70s, Herzog points out by citing from sexual instruction manuals of the era. Sex for the Evangelical Christian Right, of course, is to be confined within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage, that is, homosexuality, premarital sex or abortion is to be categorically eliminated. On the other hand, when it comes to the married couple, sex can be pleasurable, passionate, and orgasmic as it is all in harmony with God's great plan. Accordingly, religious handbooks of the 70s and 80s develop a language that Herzog calls Christian pornography, full of explicit descriptions of vaginal juices and fingering techniques. Even so, what is important to note is that up until about 15-20 years ago, the underlying assumption of this ideology was that "evangelical men naturally cherish their wives" (Herzog 31).

According to Herzog, in the late 90s Evangelical sexual discourses turn increasingly paranoid about the inner and outer enemy endangering their carefully planned out design for godly sex. To battle sexual temptation, they launch a full blown attack on masturbation and fantasy, as they are now identified as the main causes that destroy marriages by breaking the organic emotional bond that connects the couple and substituting an intrusive, artificial prosthesis for it (Herzog 34). This way heterosexual married sex is not simply offered as a joyous practice like in the 70s and 80s. It is now emerging as the only *real* sex one can have in a world where sex is in a state of crisis, where its true value is in danger. The historical context is important here; Herzog identifies two phenomena in the late 90s the fear of which can lead to such conclusion: internet porn and the invention of Viagra, both radically dehumanizing our understanding of sexuality. First, the physical act itself is perceived more and more in purely mechanical terms: Viagra disassociates sexual arousal for men from any relationship to their partner. Second, the wide availability of pornographic images promotes masturbation from a shameful and repressed act into a commonly

acknowledged practice, threatening to overdetermine the whole field of sexuality. As a conservative observer notes, “a husband who uses porn is ‘masturbating inside [his wife’s] body while he is having sex with the women on the screen’” (Dr. Mary Ann Layden qtd. in Herzog 21). This way the site of eroticism becomes more and more openly the domain of fantasy, while the actual other person in the relationship is reduced to a stage prop. From a Lacanian perspective, this move only reveals something about human sexuality that has always been part of it. As Žižek puts it, the sexual act is “a kind of ‘masturbation with a real (instead of only imagined) partner’ [...] The whole point of Lacan’s insistence on the ‘impossibility of sexual relationship’ is that this, precisely, is what the ‘actual’ sexual act is; man’s partner is never a woman in the real kernel of her being, but woman qua *a*, reduced to the fantasy-object” (*Tarrying* 42).

For Žižek, the crucial distinction lies here between imaginary reality and symbolic fiction. While the former involves an attempted closure, presenting a full image, the latter’s proper function is to remain open, to always maintain a minimal distance towards reality. For instance, heterosexual marriage works as a symbolic institution precisely and only as long as it remains open what kind of imaginary fantasy fills out the void of the symbolic, what husbands fantasize about when they make love to their wives or the other way round. Through this inherent void, gap, the symbolic evokes the dimension of the *real*, what resists symbolization, the never attainable object-cause of desire that Lacan calls *objet a*, which in this case is embodied by the *fantasmatic* partner. Precisely because every imaginary representation is lacking in some way, never fully being *it*, that it is possible to have multiple fantasies supporting the institution of marriage. Even if its hegemonic universal is heteronormative, monogamous etc., in the spirit of liberal democracy when a man has sex with his wife, he can fantasize about whoever he wants to, let it be man or woman, human or animal, adult or a child, the symbolic functioning of the institution will be upheld. That is, until we keep a distance between symbolic and imaginary, fiction and reality (*Metastases* 76). By contrast, for the Evangelical Right, the

opening up of this gap signals a crisis of the sexual relationship which has to be countered through evoking the specter of real sex in which a husband has intercourse as well as sex with his wife (she is the one who he is supposed to *fantasize* about during sex).

This means that Evangelicals want to avow precisely those primordially repressed obscene practices, hidden *heterosexual* particularities that support the heteronormative universals of their institutions only insofar as they remain hidden. For this reason, their coming out, their attempt to create the explicit rules for heterosexual sex that could help married couples fantasize during intercourse is itself symptomatic of what Žižek calls the contemporary crisis of symbolic efficiency (*Ticklish Subject* 322-334), the lack of effectivity of and belief in symbolic institutions (such as marriage, family, nation, etc.). This paranoid regulation of fantasy “saturates the void that keeps open the space for symbolic fiction,” makes *objet a* fall into reality by fixing it to a particular object, and as a consequence our symbolic universe becomes “de-realized”, ineffective. The psychoanalytic name for such a state is psychosis, in which the subject makes desperate attempts to “evict *objet a* from reality by force and thus gain access to reality” once again (*Metastases* 77). In less abstract terms this is what happens when the war on fantasy is executed through confessional practices, aiming to purify the subject from unwanted imaginary stains. Herzog, identifying in a Foucauldian manner the productive aspects of apparently repressive apparatuses of power, notes how the new Evangelicals obsessively admit their attraction to the things they supposed to hate, using a tactics that effectively makes them impervious to “the traditional liberal strategy of muckraking exposé of conservative hypocrisy. For there’s nothing anymore to expose. The sins have all long been confessed.” (Herzog 40). For instance, she cites a case from Arterburn and Stoeker’s self-help book *Every Man’s Battle: Weapons for the War Against Sexual Temptation*, where a man recounts in lucid detail how he couldn’t help but masturbate to the sight of his sister-in-law laying on her stomach in front the TV with the lines of her panties and her upper thigh clearly visible. The same technique is applied to the process of coming to terms with a

sinful, (hetero)sexually promiscuous past, involving making a teenage girlfriend pregnant then aborting the baby, having multiple sexual partners simultaneously or having sex with prostitutes. There are more bizarre cases as well, like a husband's account of his extramarital affair with a 15 year old girl where the bragging tone of the confession taps into the realm of sexual taboos as opposed to simple moral prohibitions (Herzog 34-40). I will return to the complications this latter poses in the section on abstinence.

The crucial point not to miss here, as Herzog stresses, is that the impossibly pure sex Evangelicals set out to reach in fact refers to the sexual purity of the husband. This is why, she argues, the apparent feminist streak of these religious sexual discourses should not deceive us. True, God now allows married couples to explore the domains of oral and even anal sex, to use sex toys, masturbate together, etc. It is even all right for the woman to come first during intercourse (Herzog 43). But next to this move towards the equality of sexes in bed, there is a significant clause that colors its emancipatory potential a little darker: the general advice for wives to be sexually available for their husbands all the time. As Herzog shows with regards to the wife's sexual duties towards their husbands in these practices, her role is to prop up the myth of men's limitless sexual potential. According to this narrative it is always men who want to have sex more and they have to have sex all the time based on the "scientific fact" that their sperm has to be released at least once in every seventy-two-hour cycle (Herzog 53). Thus, Herzog concludes, the project Evangelicals are working on together is not the new couple but the new man, the *real* man, a *wild man*, every woman's dream as well as God's will. This is the point where the classical Oedipalized heterosexual bourgeois masculinity is also left behind as castrated, feminized and passive: Herzog shows, citing from Robert Bly's *Iron John*, that when the time comes, the Evangelicals' real heterosexual masculinity has to be saved also from itself, from its tamed, domesticated image presented by the Church. The new, overpotent man wants to have it all. God wants him to have it all (Herzog 50-57).

It is easy to distinguish in this new male ideal the specter of the Freudian myth of the non-castrated father, leader of the primal horde who not only has all the women as his property but has the unlimited sexual potential to have them all the time. According to Freud's narrative, this obscene figure had to be killed in order for civilization to be born through the son's access to their father's women. The name of the *dead* father then functions as the symbolic law in the hand of the newly founded patriarchal brotherhood. One possible interpretation of Evangelical discourses on sex is to see them as an attempt to resurrect this primal father figure of real manhood as it existed before the institution of symbolic authority to save heterosexuality at the moment of a universal crisis of symbolic efficiency.

The Seed of the Primal Father: The Quiverfull Movement

Another realization of the new non-castrated father ideal among Evangelicals is put forward in the Quiverfull movement which dates back to the 80s and offers its new traditionalist message of restoring the patriarchal family unit with a more overtly antifeminist edge than sex manuals. The main organizing principle of the group is their anti-contraception stance, but they present it as a positive program to follow God's will by having a limitless number of children. The ideological fantasy supporting their goals places the families in the front line of a war they are waging against "what they see as forty years of destruction wrought by women's liberation: contraception, women's careers, abortion, divorce, homosexuality and child abuse, in that order." (Joyce 12). That is to say, they are building an army for God in which, as they put it, children are the arrows for the battle. Not surprisingly this idea comes from a literal ("psychotic") reading of a Biblical passage: "As arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of the youth. Happy is the man that hath a quiver full. They shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate." (King James Version, Psalm 127.3-5).

Feminist critiques warn about women's return to the "cult of domesticity" as the main purpose of their lives becomes now to serve their husband in producing children for the good cause (Dixon 39). This means not just availability for sex at all times but the acceptance of tenets like "my body is not my own", as one of the founding texts of the movement puts it. It is also important to see that most Quiverfull families are working class. As *The Nation's* Katryn Joyce notes, for these "poor women, the feminist fight for job equality won no career path but rather the pink collar labor as a housekeeper, a waitress, a clerk" (Joyce 11). What they encountered was another one of the categories doubly inscribed within the liberal democratic consensus, the fact that the liberal notion of female equality privileges not only heterosexual but also (white) middle class women. The Quiverfull movement thus can be seen as an attempt to overcome this lack of privilege in the form of an antifeminist backlash turned proactive by becoming more normative than those bourgeois liberals ever dared to be. By evoking the ideal of the overpotent primordial father, these Evangelicals ultimately uncover the hidden heteronormative hierarchies of the liberal democratic consensus, creating an affirmative relation to them, accepting them as natural, as God's will, thus exposing, although inadvertently, the contradictions of the liberal ideology. This is why, much like those Evangelicals confessing their impure fantasies in public, they can be seen as performing a heterosexual coming out, avowing the disavowed obscene dimension of the heteronormative liberal consensus. They are like Queer Nation without the irony, that is, without the underlying assumption that some symbolic institution (such as the nation) still works in the background to get the joke.

Performing Abstinence for Daddy

Along with Evangelicals' discourses on marital sex and reproduction, there is an obvious shift in their treatment of abstinence as well in the late 90s. While abstinence pledges among such religious youth were not uncommon during the 80s and the

90s, they worked more along the lines of what Foucault called an incitement to discourse (Foucault 17-36), that is, by preserving technical virginity they opened up the way towards a non-penetrative eroticism such as mutual masturbation or oral sex. By the new millennium, however, the world purity started to take up a different, more literal meaning, closing the gap between ideal and practice. In this shift, the movement's apparent gender neutral balance toppled, the focus on young women became obvious. Much like the Quiverfull wives, abstinence girls started to talk about their body not really belonging to them (belonging instead to God, of course) as well as about the necessary sacrifice they have to make for their future married *sex life* to be perfect (Herzog 98). Combined with the conviction that God has already chosen the ideal man for the young virgins, it is not hard to see the new abstinence movement as a supplement of the new cult of real masculinity.

To elucidate this even more, I will look at the so called purity balls, a social ritual among Evangelicals popular since the late 90s. Symptomatically, they even made a Glamour Magazine headline: "It's like a wedding but with a twist: Young women exchange rings, take vows and enjoy a first dance... with their dads. 'Purity balls' are the next big thing in the save-it-till-marriage movement. Smart or scary?" (Baumgardner). On the one hand, to be a purity girl appears as only one among many fashionable and commodified subcultural trends, as playful slogans on T-shirts and pieces of underwear suggest: "Abstinence Ave. Exit When Married" or "No Trespassing On This Property. My Father Is Watching." (Glanton). On the other hand it's hard to ignore the obscene references to incest and underage sexuality so overtly present in these rituals. The purity ball guidelines describe the participants as "just old enough... [to] have begun menstruating" making a reference to the well-known folk wisdom about a young girl's readiness for reproductive sex which directly contradicts the ideology of abstinence. Also, the girls are supposed to wear sexy black dresses in which they look more like the girlfriends of their fathers, who in turn are encouraged to tell their

daughters how beautiful they are. Not to mention that the most popular song the couples dance to is titled “I’ll Always Be Your Baby.” (Glanton)

This is not to say that purity balls consciously work to promote father-daughter incest. But it is also not enough to write off the phenomenon as just another instance of the Foucauldian productive side of power where the performance of abstinence in front of the panoptic gaze of paternal authority could open up pleasurable sites of resistance elsewhere. This, no doubt, happens as well, however I would like to emphasize that when Foucault talks about the “perpetual incitement to incest in the bourgeois family” of the 19th century, he stresses that this was possible by eliminating actual incest widely spread especially among lower classes. “On the one hand, the father was elevated into an object of compulsory love, but on the other hand, if he was a loved one, he was at the same time a fallen one in the eyes of the law.” (Foucault 130). In psychoanalytic terms, incestuous *desire* can emerge only as a supplement to the castrated father of the symbolic law, in whose eyes the real, primordial father becomes a fallen one. When the gap that made the symbolic possible is eliminated, incestuous fantasies collapse into symbolic rituals, they create a new obscene spectacle of the law organized around the enjoyment of the returning primal father, the new man who comes out of his closet as excessively heterosexual.

Challenging the Symbolic Father: Letterman vs. Palin

To illustrate the antagonism between the traditional symbolic law of repression and the returning primordial father of the late capitalist spectacle who has nothing to hide, I will present an analysis of the media feud that happened between David Letterman and Sarah Palin in the summer of 2009. The conflict started when Letterman, host of the popular late night talk show in the US, told a rather tasteless joke about (the Evangelical Christian) Sarah Palin’s daughter on the June 10 episode of his program. Here is what he said: “Sarah Palin went to the Yankee game yesterday. There was one awkward moment during the seventh inning stretch: her daughter was knocked up by Alex

Rodriguez.” (MangoVisionHD). As it’s well known, Sarah Palin’s 17 year old daughter did in fact get pregnant the year before, which was an event that created a controversy of its own thanks to Palin’s abstinence only sex education campaign and the way Bristol helped in its promotion by serving as the bad example. As for Letterman’s joke, complications started to appear when it became public that it was in fact not the (at the time already) 18 year old Bristol but Sarah Palin’s other daughter, the 14 year old Willow who attended the game with her mother. Palin issued a statement, accusing Letterman of joking about the statutory rape of minors and how with this kind of talk he contributes to the sexual exploitation of underage girls by older men, an outrage that happens in an “atrociously high rate” in America (MangoVisionHD).

The fact that these accusations apparently made David Letterman very uncomfortable is a sign that he, at the time, occupied the place of symbolic authority the smooth functioning of which needs the disavowal not only of rape and sexual abuse but the knowledge of underage sexuality all together. The next day he spent 8 minutes trying to discursively reestablish the boundary of acceptable sexual activity at the age of 18, and as a “gentleman”, he also admitted the low quality of his joke concerning Bristol Palin: “Am I guilty of poor taste? Yes. Did I suggest that it was ok for her 14 year old daughter to be having promiscuous sex? No.” (MangoVisionHD). It is crucial to distinguish on the one hand Letterman’s liberal yet male chauvinist gender performance involving a series of sexist jokes about Sarah Palin herself that he had been telling since she entered the political arena (such as describing her as a “slutty flight attendant” in the same June 10 monologue), and on the other this incident that actually broke the chain of his performances by uncovering the disavowed underside of his respectable persona that was there all along.

Palin didn’t accept Letterman’s answer, and came up with another statement attacking him more directly as one of the nation’s dirty old men abusing young girls. Responding to Letterman’s inviting her and Willow to the show, she wrote: “The Palins have no intention of providing a rating’s boost to Letterman’s show... Plus it would be wise to

keep Willow away from David Letterman.” The paradox is that although this was obviously a cheap political ploy on her part to exploit a situation that happened by chance, she nonetheless was on the right track subverting a male dominated symbolic normativity. She was, however, on the right track for the wrong reasons. When she was asked to explain the last part of her latest statement on the Today Show (“Do you suggest that David Letterman can’t be trusted around your 14 year old girl?”), she came up with a perplexing answer: “Maybe he couldn’t be trusted because Willow’s had enough of these type of comments and maybe Willow would want to uhh ‘react’ to him in a way that maybe would catch him off guard” (Speakmymind02). After watching Letterman being uncomfortable for 8 minutes by the mere thought of teenage sexuality, one can imagine what kind of “reaction” Palin talks about that would embarrass him even more. It might seem, again, that not counting her insistence of calling her daughter’s showing of her sexuality a reaction, Palin actually makes a valid feminist point by insisting on the agency of her daughter. But it seems more plausible to read this Freudian slip as Palin’s reproach to Letterman for not being man enough, unlike those real men in Evangelical discourses, the ones who aren’t squeamish when it comes to fucking teenage girls. This is the only way Palin’s accusations make sense at the libidinal level, serving as a footnote to her dubious political performances of self-objectification.¹ Her act is subversive of liberal morals and privileges, yes, but this subversion is in service of a sexual counterrevolution aiming at the restoration of the Freudian primal father.

As for Letterman, on Jun 18, he did the “right thing” that can be expected from a male figure of traditional symbolic authority: he apologized to the Palins by taking full responsibility for the public perception of his joke regardless of his original intentions (Sarah Palin For President 2012). In psychoanalytic terms, this move is called

¹ See for example her complaints about a “sexist” *Newsweek* cover featuring her in a fitness costume. Much like in the case of her daughter, her renunciation of sexism turns into its opposite, sending one of her well known obscene winks to the audience (BangTheNews).

identification with the symptom; with the return of the repressed enjoyment of his respectable gender performance materialized in an obscene joke the effects of which he had no control over. It is crucial to see that through this act, the “normal” order of things was (at least temporarily) restored, the disavowed content got excluded again, that is, Palin and her daughters could go back to where they belong in a patriarchal symbolic order: to the private sphere of their family. It would be too much of a speculation to say that Palin resigning from the governorship for no apparent reason a couple of weeks later had anything to do with the Letterman-affair, but as the subsequent Late Show jokes suggest, the connection was made at least in fantasy (ANTI_S_COOP). It is worth mentioning here that Letterman and the symbolic order’s victory over Palin was a pyrrhic one. A few months later he was unambiguously exposed as an obscene father figure when his sexual affairs with a series of much younger interns were revealed, showing all too clearly that his old fashioned liberal morals and his insistence on the separation of private and public are outdated in the contemporary society of the spectacle where, as Guy Debord once put it, “that which appears is good, that which is good appears” (12).

This means that while a Butlerian critique of phallic gender identification is very effective against David Letterman performing the role of Oedipal authority, Sarah Palin’s lack of concern for a coherent identity and symbolic dignity needs a different set of critical apparatus, one that differentiates her gender performance from the non-identity Butler or Laclau talks about. It can be understood as serving the post-symbolic ideal of the “real man” which is not an identity that the subject tries to reach through its imitation but a performance that renounces, negates all existing, “castrated” forms of masculinity. It is such an ideal that appears in discourses of the Evangelical Christian Right, the ideal of the Freudian primordial father who has all the women and has unlimited sexual potential. Thus while technically siding with Butler’s project of the subversion of normative gender identities, Palin’s activities point towards a much more sinister form of male domination.

Curing Homosexuality by Coming Out as Heterosexual

Before concluding, let's go back to the initial question about the relation between homosexual and heterosexual coming outs. How did the shift in Evangelical discourses on sex towards practices of coming out in the late 90s change their relation to homosexuality? Can the Christian Right's attacks on homosexuals be interpreted along the lines of their spectacular renunciation of heterosexual transgressions mentioned in the previous sections? According to Herzog, until the mid-90s, dominant conservative discourses in the US treated homosexuality as the unnatural binary opposite of the heterosexual norm. Based on this perception, anti-gay activism did everything to associate homosexuals with sex criminals, child molesters, and perverts. The stake was the mobilization of the Christian Right around a pro-family, anti-gay agenda, as Pat Buchanan's 1992 campaign slogan "Family Rights Forever/Gay Rights Never" proclaimed (qtd. in Herzog 62). In Judith Butler's terms, homosexuals were treated here as objects, foreign bodies of otherness that had to be expelled from the social like excrement from the human body so that normalized subjects could reach their discrete boundaries (*Gender Trouble* 169).

This relation changes in the mid-90s when as new strategy the Evangelical Religious Right starts to emphasize the curability of the homosexual condition. Gays and lesbians now are not criminals anymore but victims—usually of some kind of abuse—and most crucially, as Herzog points out, they are "insecure heterosexual wannabes". This way Evangelical ideology places them alongside other never pure enough heterosexuals, offering them the psychotic identification with the *heterosexual object* to reach "gender wholeness" (Herzog 80), that is, the possibility of coming out as heterosexual. In this light, the ritual of coming out itself has to be reevaluated as the practices of Evangelicals lay bare the deadlocks of liberal identity politics. Perhaps one could say that because of this, contrary to the claims of contemporary queer critics if homonormativity (Puar; Edelman), coming out as homosexual (or as a

member of any other sexual minority) gains an additional importance. What if the true political significance of these acts lies not in the avowal of particular minority identities formerly excluded from the reigning heteronormative site of universality? What if homosexual coming outs instead involve a truly radical disidentification, a withdrawal not so much from public, purely formal texture of the symbolic order as Butler's queer politics would like to have it (*Bodies that Matter* 4) but from the very obscene rituals supporting it, effectively coloring it heteronormative. For this reason, coming out in a progressive sense is a disidentification from a disidentification, the negation of a negation. This framework also sheds a new light on the question of the closet. The problem with being in the closet is the false conviction that it's the best defense against the oppressive public space out there biased against homosexuals and other minorities. By contrast, as I have suggested, heterosexual coming outs are oppressive in a different way, effectively eliminating such an idea of the public in favor of private enjoyment that saturates the former field of universality. In this sense Evangelicals share the distrust of closeted gays and lesbians about symbolic institutions; the difference is that unlike minorities, they can thrive even more effectively in a post-symbolic space.

Conclusion

In sum, my thesis is that the sexual discourses of contemporary Evangelicals in the US represent a move beyond the liberal democratic politics struggling for equal rights for different sexual identity groups. By *openly* supporting a heteronormative and male dominated form of social organization, Evangelicals aim to overthrow the current symbolic order based on a *hidden* heterosexual bias. I described this move as the psychotic coming out as heterosexual, organized around the idea of a new man, the impossible norm of a real masculinity defined negatively which can be seen as a return to the Freudian primal father. I suggested that this new male figure escapes the logic of the Laclauian-Butlerian understanding of power by standing in

the short circuit of its functioning, thus getting a hold of a sinister agency beyond identity politics without being radically democratic. This also means that the strategic shift of queer theory after 9/11 away from the Butler's Laclauan reformist politics of non-identity (or ironic identity politics) towards a more radical anti-state anarchism may end up fighting the wrong enemy. While American liberal democracy with its hidden heterosexist bias was certainly the obstacle for queer politics in the 90s, today we have a new form of anti-liberal (and ultimately anti-state libertarian) heteronormative power apparatus emerging against which queers may have to mobilize the universal symbolic framework still present in the remainders of the liberal state, rather than throwing it out with the bathwater of normativity.

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