

ONE NATION UNDER GAY

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*Gay Rights and Moral Panic:
The Origins of America's Debate on Homosexuality*
Fred Fejes
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. x + 280 pp.

In an early scene of Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008), Harvey Milk approaches the "top gays" of San Francisco to see if their way of doing politics can make room for his own. The film suggests that Milk's populism and sexual frankness are incompatible with the don't-rock-the-boat, crypto-homophile stance of the other men. An hour later, Milk's Bay Area-based efforts against the Briggs Initiative have changed the hearts and minds of a majority of state voters, including those in conservative Orange County, as if by magic. Fred Fejes's important book complicates and deromanticizes this history. At the book's center is a detailed account of the major U.S. struggles over gay rights in 1977 and 1978, from the battle against Anita Bryant in Dade County, Florida, to six other local contests that followed in its wake, including the statewide struggle in California. Fejes clarifies the difference between the Religious Right's success at repealing gay civil rights ordinances like the one in Dade and its concurrent failures in passing proactively antigay measures, such as Briggs's Proposition 6, which would have made it legal to fire any public school teacher who spoke favorably of homosexuality. Fejes also makes it clear that the "top gays," such as the *Advocate's* publisher, David Goodstein, did not fade away during these struggles. Goodstein and others used their money and connections to steer media framing of the issue from homosexuality to privacy and to harness support from powerful organizations and individuals, such as the teachers' unions and ex-governor Ronald Reagan. Fejes's book clarifies the shift toward a desexualized, privacy-rights understanding of "gay rights" in the

late 1970s, an important dynamic that Van Sant's movie obscures with its rhetoric of sexual freedom and coming out.

Though the core of Fejes's book is local, its frame is national. It is concerned with the role of mainstream media channels in shaping popular conceptions of homosexuality. Widespread media attention transformed Bryant's county-wide referendum into an unprecedented national debate over the definition, role, and legitimacy of homosexuality in the United States. Fejes argues that the ensuing series of nationally mediated contests fostered a new national identity among U.S. gays and lesbians. "Emerging during these months was what political scholar Benedict Anderson described as 'an imagined community,' a community defined not by physical space and boundaries or the actual physical contact among its members but by the mental image of affinity — 'the image of communion' — that each held in their minds" (215). As they sought ways to support unprepared and beleaguered local activists in Miami, St. Paul, Wichita, and elsewhere, gay activists in more-established urban communities formed and reinforced national fundraising campaigns and political organizations. Fejes's book is thus a history of the "origins of America's debate on homosexuality," a history of the rise of a national gay and lesbian movement, and (though less explicitly so) a history of the rise of U.S. gay nationalism.

The book chronicles the political efforts of the two major camps in the late-1970s struggle over gay rights: gay liberal activists and the Religious Right. It devotes many pages to the effort by the main group of Miami gay activists to establish a neutral, Carter-era "human rights" framework that would downplay the homosexual, and by extension sexual, specificity of their cause. But the book also discusses the competing insistence by some gay activists on a sexual-liberationist framework. Moreover, Fejes presents his history in a way that does not boil down to a simple matter of gay versus straight. The attitudes and experiences of Miami's black, Cuban, white, and Jewish populations become central to the story of the Dade County campaign and vote. Along the same lines, Fejes refuses to allow Bryant's particular inflection of Southern Baptist faith to stand in for the entirety of the "Religious Right," and he also counters the misperception that all religious voters voted against gay rights. Throughout, the book explores the media and demographic strategizing behind the competing get-out-the-vote campaigns. This approach is one of the book's strengths, though a few sections uncritically reproduce the blanket group characterizations that are a hallmark of demographic thinking. Moreover, the voting blocs and media sources that Fejes presents are more diverse than the pool of activists he interviews and discusses, which is composed mainly of the gay white men who had access to high-profile positions in the

movement. The book also offers little discussion of contemporaneous critiques of mainstream gay politics emanating from further on the left.

Oddly, despite the book's title, the term *moral panic* seldom appears in the text, and Fejes does not engage at length with the critical literature on the concept. Where the term does appear, Fejes applies it to mass-mediated public anxiety around homosexuality. However, the antigay actions of Bryant and Briggs were intimately bound up with another moral panic of the late 1970s, an orchestrated state and media campaign around child pornography, sexual abuse, and prostitution, replete with dubious claims and inflated statistics. Fejes discusses this concurrent development, but not as a "moral panic." He seems interested in these parallel events only to the extent that they provided political ammunition to the Religious Right. I believe there is a missed opportunity here. In a book so focused on the relationship between mass-media framings and gay activist self-presentations, it seems vital to attend to the interplay of these two moral panics. What role did the late-1970s panic over intergenerational sex and child sexual endangerment play in the consolidation and accomplishments of gay liberalism?

Today, as the mainstream movement strives to reduce the complexity and contradictions of queer politics to a "gay rights" movement, and beyond this to a "marriage rights" movement, it is likely that the electoral and legislative battles of the late 1970s will continue to supplant the Stonewall riots as our dominant origin story—a phenomenon already witnessed in *Milk*. For this reason, Fejes's book arrives just in time. With its wide-ranging yet meticulous attention to detail and difference, the book offers a history of the late 1970s that is, one hopes, irreducible and difficult to romanticize.

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DOI 10.1215/10642684-2010-030