

**The Politics of Signs: Gay and Lesbian issues in
Comparative Perspective.**

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In an article written in the journal *Differences*, Judith Butler (2002) rather bemusedly responded to a vituperative French debate, sparked by issues of same-sex partnership recognition and adoption, in which philosopher Sylviane Agacinski constructed Butlerite queer theory as a monstrous American threat to the French symbolic order. I say bemusedly, because Butler is concerned that state legitimisation can involve normalising same-sex relationships, for example, by privileging traditional marriage-type relationships and discouraging other types of sexual relationships and behaviours. After all, feminists have long noted that marriage can be seen as having some regulatory components, as being a form of governmentality (e.g. Brook, 2002).

Those issues of normalisation are ones that will be returned to later. However, for the moment, this paper focuses on discussing how issues of gay and lesbian equality and rights are depicted as so threatening in political discourse. It analyses the ways in which gay and lesbian issues are constructed as broader social signs that go far beyond the more narrow considerations of policy debates. The paper focuses on the discourse of politicians, exploring issues ranging from gay and lesbian marriage to national identity to analyse the diverse meanings attributed to gays and lesbians in the body politic. Needless to say, this paper's emphasis on signs and meaning is in no way meant to detract from the importance of other work which focuses on understanding policy ramifications and the need to remove systematic discrimination (see e.g. Rimmerman et al., 2000; Lahey, 1999; Johnson, 2003). For

example, it has been estimated that there are 1,049 federal rights that come with marriage in the U.S., ranging from social security to employment benefits, that are denied to same-sex couples (Kotluski, 2004: 56-7). However, analysing the symbolic implications may help to explain why politicians have sometimes been so electorally cautious about instituting policy change. After all, even some parties which have supported various gay and lesbian rights, such as the U.S. Democrats, U.K. Labour and Australian Labor, have so far baulked at supporting same-sex marriage.

Politicians and the meaning of marriage.

For, it is not just French philosophers who can see issues such as adoption or gay marriage as threats to the symbolic order, but also many politicians. Indeed, it is striking how many politicians state that their opposition to same-sex marriage or gay parenting is based on a concern about *meaning*. Their concerns are often very similar despite very different national, constitutional, federal, institutional and legislative contexts. For example, in countries such as the U.K. or U.S. marriage confers major benefits and entitlements not allowed to heterosexual de facto couples (unlike in Australia).

The concern with meaning can also cross political boundaries. Bill Clinton argued that he could not accept the term marriage being used for same-sex unions because:

marriage in our culture and to me has a certain connotation, meaning for me, that has not gotten me to where I could accept that, because I think it's basically a union for the purpose of, among other things, having children and -- so that's

why I've never supported the term of marriage (Clinton, 1999). [Emphasis added]

George W. Bush emphasised the importance of *meaning* even more strongly when proposing his constitutional amendment against same-sex marriage. He suggested that the challenges same-sex marriage posed to the meaning of marriage threatened the very foundations of western civilisation itself:

After more than two centuries of American jurisprudence, and millennia of human experience, a few judges and local authorities are presuming to change the most fundamental institution of civilization. Their actions have created confusion on an issue that requires clarity....Activist courts have left the people with one recourse. If we are to prevent the meaning of marriage from being changed forever, our nation must enact a constitutional amendment to protect marriage in America.... (George W. Bush, 2004). [Emphasis added]

Bush's statements seem mild compared with some other U.S. politicians' views on how the fundamental meaning of marriage will be demeaned by same-sex marriages. So, New Jersey Republican State Senator Gerald Cardinale argues that: 'You can be very fond of another person of the same sex, but it's not a marriage, and we should not demean marriage by recognizing them. Look, there are people who are very fond of their dogs...but that's not a marriage either' (cited in *The Advocate*, 15 April 2002: 10).

It is not just U.S. politicians who emphasise *meaning* when opposing same-sex marriage. Australia's socially conservative Prime Minister, John Howard, sees changing the meaning of marriage as threatening the survival of the species:

Well, this is not in any way an attack on gay people.... it's just a strong statement in support of the central role of marriage in our society. Traditional marriage is one of the bedrock institutions of our society and I don't want anything to occur that further weakens it. Marriage, as we understand it in our society, is about children, having children, raising them, providing for the survival of the species and I think if the same status is given in our society to gay unions as are given to traditional marriage we will weaken that bedrock institution (John Howard, 2003) [Emphasis added].

Note that the repeated association of same-sex marriage/relationships with undermining 'the family' suggests that same-sex relationships have come to symbolise an overwhelming threat to traditional gender relations, parenting and mainstream conceptions of everyday life (see further Butler, 2002: 29).

The Australian media is also quite clear that Howard is emphasising the *meaning* of marriage. So, Australia's national daily echoes George W. Bush when it argues that elected representatives, rather than judges, should determine the meaning of marriage.

The community still has the idea that marriage, by the very meaning of the word, can only refer to unions between men and women. And the Government

wants to ensure this is the way it stays, at least until there is a community consensus for change. Without this legislation, social engineers on the bench and at the bar would likely soon find some contrivance under international law that would bind Australia to acknowledge same sex marriages and adoption rights. (Editorial, *The Weekend Australian*, 29-30 May 2004) [Emphasis added].

Nor are such concerns about *meaning* confined to the U.S. and Australia. British Shadow Home Secretary, Oliver Letwin appears concerned that the Church should determine the meaning of marriage. He writes that: 'I am reluctant to consider extending marriage to apply to gay relationships, based on the idea that the words of the Church of England marriage service actually mean something' (cited in *Gay Times*, July 2003: 79) [Emphasis added].

So, politicians themselves are emphasising that the issue of gay marriage is partly an issue of meaning. In an uncertain, confusing and threatening world, homosexuality is being depicted as both the enemy within (undermining nations, civilisation, the survival of the species, traditional gender relations) and the enemy outside (foreign recognition of same-sex marriages will be imposed on the nation by traitorous judges). The very bedrock institutions of society; the very nature of everyday family life, are depicted as being under threat.

Failing to recognise the importance of the symbolic threat can lead to policy defeats. So, Steven Seidman suggests that Clinton lost his battle over gays serving in the military, and resorted to the dubious compromise of 'don't ask, don't tell', because he'd underestimated the symbolic importance of the issue.

It was perhaps a mistake on Clinton's part to approach the issue of gays in the military as merely a question of rights. As Congress, the military brass, and the American public weighed in, it was apparent that the battle around gays in the military had become part of a symbolic national drama opponents may have also understood in a way that Clinton and some gay activists did not that incorporating gays into the military would signal the beginning of the end of the historical association of national identity and heterosexuality. (Seidman, 2002: 181).

One could add that the broader gendered symbolic order was also at issue given that allowing gays to serve in the military would threaten the particular forms of masculinity normalised in U.S. military life.

In fact, politicians are quite explicit in their arguments that issues regarding sexuality involve both symbolic and policy aspects. So, Australian Prime Minister Howard argues for a combination of both policy and symbolic support for (heterosexual) family life:

On the one hand you don't want a government running a 'nanny state' telling you how to behave, heaven forbid. On the other hand you don't want a government that is utterly disinterested either in providing the symbols of commitment to family life or indeed the practical policy measures that help people achieve more satisfactory outcomes in their families and in their personal relationships (Howard, 1999).

As we'll see below, the symbolic importance of marriage and families has a long history in western thought. It is particularly important in a time of change and uncertainty.

Heterosexuality and the symbolic political order.

Queer theory has long pointed out the simultaneous pervasiveness and potential fragility of heteronormative discourse. Arguably, the politicians' concern with meaning is yet another example of what Eve Sedgwick has termed 'a chronic endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition' in western culture (Sedgwick, 1994: 1). In this case, the vexed binary distinction between heterosexual and homosexual desire is being policed by anointing heterosexual desire as the only one worthy of the accolade of marriage, thereby reaffirming the significance of different genders, privileging the desire between them, and denying that same-sex love can be just as deep as different-sex love.

In short, politicians are desperately trying to legislatively fix meaning in response to what Sasha Roseneil has argued is a widespread and significant 'destabilization of the hetero/homosexual binary' extending through popular culture to patterns of intimacy in peoples' everyday lives (Roseneil, 2002: 33). It is an attempt to reassert the importance of marriage in a period when 'there can be few families which do not include at least some members who diverge from traditional, normative heterorelational practice, whether as divorcees, unmarried mothers and fathers, singles, lesbians, gay men or bisexuals' (Roseneil, 2002: 34). In such times, defending the heterosexuality of marriage becomes the final symbolic border to be

held in a desperate attempt to hold back social change and reassert certainty in both the body politic and everyday life.

The need to reassert certainty is particularly important for many heterosexuals because marriage is seen as a sign of personal success and a crucial aspect of one's own identity. In such views, marriage is the apogee of heterosexual achievement. It is seen as a public sign that one has made the correct moral choices and been rewarded by an ostensibly satisfying and fulfilling personal life as long-term sexual partner, mother or father. So, same-sex marriage effectively devalues an important status symbol. If even deviants can be married, how can marriage still be a symbol of heterosexual success? Personal status and identity, as well as heterosexual privilege, are under threat.

All of these issues are very important in explaining both the importance of heterosexual marriage as a sign and the pressure on politicians to defend the 'meaning' of marriage. However, same-sex marriage also raises some issues specific to the political sphere, in the narrow sense of institutional politics. There is a long history of the formal political symbolic order being constructed in heterosexual terms. Politicians may well be unaware of the exact lineage of their arguments. However, feminist theorists have long pointed out that the western citizen tended to be constructed in traditional liberal theory as a (property-owning, white) male head of household with women, whether wives or daughters, subsumed under their authority and denied rights such as voting. In other words, the citizen was constructed as a married man (Okin, 1979; Coole, 1988; Brown, 1995).

Although many feminists don't draw attention to this fact, the male citizen, and his adult female dependant, are also thereby being constructed as having an at

least predominantly heterosexual identity. In other words, issues of the subordination of same-sex relationships are just as crucial here as issues of the subordination of women and neither should be privileged over the other. Although political theorists such as Carole Pateman don't address the heteronormative aspect, they have also argued that marriage played a particularly important role in the construction of (male) citizenship and the political order. Indeed, Pateman argues that the marriage contract underlay the symbolic social contract of traditional liberal political theory; the founding myth via which it was argued that free *men* gave up certain individual rights to a political sovereign in order to ensure their collective security (Pateman, 1988). Heterosexual marriage has therefore long been a potent political symbol in western political thought.

Various commentators (e.g. Phelan, 2001; Richardson, 2000; Bell and Binnie, 2000) have analysed the ways in which the citizen has been constructed in heterosexual terms, involving what could be termed 'hegemonic heterosexuality' (Richardson, 2000: 257) or 'heteronormative citizenship' (Johnson, 2002, 2003). Historically, much government policy simply assumed that the citizen was heterosexual in areas ranging from taxation benefits to adoption, medical guardianship, funerals, pensions and superannuation and thereby excluded same-sex couples from entitlements and legal recognition. The citizen was constructed as heterosexual, just as traditionally the citizen had been constructed as white, male and property-owning.¹

Notes.

¹ For an analysis of the role of class and race, as well as sexuality, in the politicization of marriage, see Smith (2001).

Additionally, heterosexuality was also constructed as an essential private value underlying the public sphere. As Valerie Lehr has explained, although the liberal individual's decisions are meant to be private, it is assumed that mature adults will privilege the values of heterosexual marriage and monogamy (Lehr, 1999: 133). Now that those values are seen to be under threat, the defeat of homosexuality is seen as central to maintaining the moral values underlying the public sphere, particularly given the failure by many U.S. politicians to argue for a clear separation between church and state (Jakobsen and Pellgrini, 2003: xiii-xv). As Jennifer Terry has pointed out, in the U.S. 'right-wing Christian fundamentalists have declared that homosexuality is to the 1990s what abortion was to the 1980s: the enemy in a battle of moral cleansing to determine the future of the world' (Terry, 1999: 392). Bush's references to defending civilisation reflect such beliefs. Bush's call for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage also draws on an influential U.S. belief that the constitution is itself a rhetorical symbol standing 'for a larger moral consensus about proper public and private behaviour' (Levin, 1997: 34).

So Davina Kotluski is correct when she tells gay and lesbian Americans: 'Remember this: Marriage is not just a word. It's a word embedded in a whole cultural system that we are daily asked to participate in, while being excluded from (Kotluski, 2004: 29).' It is also a cultural system that is deeply implicated in the political symbolic order, including both public and private constructions of citizen identity. As Australian gay activist Rodney Croome points out, the symbolism of marriage is important precisely because 'to have the right to marry is to be considered a full citizen, is to be considered a full member of the community, is to be considered human.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 5-6 June 2004).

Homosexuality as a sign of the stranger.

Homosexuals have therefore long been constructed as, to use Phelan's term 'sexual strangers' in the body politic. Phelan is here drawing on Bauman's conception of the 'stranger', characterising gays and lesbians as passport citizens nonetheless marginalised as an 'other' in public life (Phelan, 2001: 4). So in President Bush's world-view, same-sex marriage is a threat to civilisation. In Prime Minister Howard's view it is a threat to the survival of the species. The status of gays and lesbians as a symbolic stranger is so strong that homophobic discourses often draw on xenophobic, racist and ethno-centric discourses. Anna Marie Smith has argued that homophobic discourse during the Thatcher years in Britain 'drew extensively upon already normalized racist metaphors around disease, foreign invasions, unassimilable "other" cultures, dangerous criminals, subversive intellectuals, excessive permissiveness and so on (Smith, 1994: 22).' Similarly, xenophobia underlies the *Australian* editorial's fear of Australian judges recognising international same-sex marriages. It also underlies Sylviane Agacinski's construction of Butlerite queer theory as an American foreign 'other'.

Politicians' discourse can therefore play upon popular fears. In extreme right discourses, same-sex marriages have been depicted as a threat to border security. As Davina Kotluski notes:

The Concerned Women for America recently warned that same-sex marriage 'poses a new threat to U.S. border security.' The organization called a legally

married Canadian same-sex couple trying to enter the U.S. as a married couple the 'latest pair of domestic terrorists' (Cited in Kotluski, 2004: 103).

Here homosexuals are once again depicted as a foreign threat, presumably equivalent to Islamist terrorists and illegal aliens. Similarly, Rainbow Labor activists within the Australian Labor Party expressed their concern that the Howard government was attempting to turn gay marriage into another 'Tampa'; the ship carrying asylum-seekers that the Howard government barred and used as a successful border protection, wedge issue in the 2001 election (Mills, 2004). George W. Bush may also have been evoking 'Clash of Civilisations' discourse in his reference to the threats gay marriage posed to civilisation. After all, homosexuals can also be constructed as the threat within that will bring foreign enemies upon us. Jerry Falwell, the prominent member of the American religious right, argued that September 11th was due the wrath of God at America's debauched moral standards, including the prevalence of homosexuality (Burack, 2003: 330, 345). The similarities between Christian Right discourses about homosexuality and previous discourses about the threat of communism, also both an enemy from within and without, have been noted by a number of commentators (Herman, 1998: 17, 50, 96).

Precisely because gays and lesbians can be a sign of the 'other', homosexuality can also be used to signal positions on broader socially conservative issues such as race and ethnicity where it is no longer so acceptable to explicitly articulate discriminatory attitudes and measures. As Brian Fone points out: 'In modern Western society, where racism has disappeared, anti-Semitism is condemned, and misogyny has lost its legitimacy, homophobia remains, perhaps the last acceptable

prejudice' (Fone, 2000: 3). Fone may well be being over-optimistic regarding the unacceptability of the other forms of prejudice. Nonetheless, homophobia can operate as a different form of dog-whistle politics, in which a politician makes an audible sound that explicitly advocates one form of discrimination, but that audible sound also has additional silent meanings. So, a socially conservative position on homosexuality can also signify a general socially conservative position that electors read as extending to other issues that it may be riskier for politicians to articulate explicitly, such as support for traditional gender roles, racism or ethno-centrism.

As Carl Stychin has pointed out, homosexuality is an extremely malleable concept that can be used to signify very different things in different nations:

homosexuality has been associated with communism, fascism, bourgeois capitalism, colonialism, the west and north, the east and south, environmentalism, Europe, and North America. In the project of nation building, homosexuality is a ready discursive tool that can be conflated with any enemy of the state, in the process becoming the enemy within (Stychin, 1998: 194).

The signification of homosexuality as the 'stranger' can be mobilised by diverse cultures. In some Asian or African political discourse, homosexuality can represent Western colonial influences. For example, long-serving ex-Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir claimed that western influences were undermining traditional Malaysian values since 'western films idolise sex, violence, murders and wars. Now

they permit homosexual practices and accept religious leaders with openly gay lifestyles' (cited in Hacker, 2003). As Baden Offord explains, for Mahathir:

Homosexuality is always conflated with perceived moral evils, and, moreover, it is sometimes conflated with democratic rights....Mahathir's claim is a type of inverse 'orientalism' where the play of the postcolonial power is to describe homosexuality as a Western social trait which was brought to Asian cultures by imperialism.Asian leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and Dr Mahathir thus use homosexuality as a discourse of cultural and geographical difference. ... that can be deployed to maintain a kind of cultural purity (Offord, 2003: 45).

However, homosexuality is also malleable enough to be used as positive sign and it is to a discussion of those diverse discourses that we will now turn. For the desperate attempts by politicians to fix meaning is precisely an acknowledgement that traditionally heteronormative signs are now being contested.

Gay and Lesbian Equality as a Positive Sign.

While Dr Mahathir used homosexuality to signify undesirable western influences, assassinated Dutch politician, Pim Fortuyn, used it to signify desirable ones. Fortuyn endorsed a common far right agenda that sees Islam as a threat to western civilisation and culture (see Betz, 2002). He cited his own experiences as a homosexual to argue that Dutch values were inclusive and tolerant and to oppose immigration from Islamic countries which, he claimed, had fundamentalist,

homophobic values (Fortuyn, 2001; *The Guardian*, 7 May 2002). Some conservative U.S. gays have lauded Fortuyn's views (Bronski, 2002). However, his positive use of homosexuality is unusual given that the Far Right generally depicts homosexuality as threatening the family, birth-rates, and national survival (Mudde, 1999:188). Fortuyn's arguments not only neglect the complexity of Islamic attitudes towards homosexuality (see e.g. Wafer, 1997; Lunsing 2003), they overlook the fact that western Christian fundamentalists have been uniting with Islamic (and Jewish and Hindu) fundamentalists to try to defeat gay rights initiatives in bodies such as the United Nations (Buss, 2004: 258). Nonetheless, Fortuyn's views provide an example of the exceptionally diverse ways in which homosexuality can be mobilised as a positive sign.

Tolerance of homosexuality can also be constructed as an indicator of economic progress and success. Economist Richard Florida's 'Gay Index' asserts that there is a strong relationship between the percentage of gays in a city and that city's success in the new creative economy. It is not that gays are somehow brighter or more likely to be members of Florida's 'Creative Class' workers whose creativity 'is now the decisive source of competitive advantage in virtually every industry, from automobiles to fashion, food products, and information technology itself (Florida, 2003: 5).' Rather, the percentage of gays is a sign indicating an 'open and tolerant' city in which such workers will feel more at home (Florida, 2003: 258). Florida's argument has been taken up by the Singapore government, previously known for its repressive attitude towards homosexuality (Chua, 2003; *Financial Times*, 11 July 2003). Prime Minister Goh has announced a relaxation of attitudes towards homosexuals in the public service. He also announced that Singapore would be encouraging

(implicitly gay-friendly) 'bohemian enclaves' in order to foster Singapore's 'Creative Economy' (*Time Magazine Asia*, 7 July 2003).²

Fortuyn's and Florida's arguments are more unusual versions of a relatively common argument that depicts increasing gay and lesbian equality as a sign of progress. This is particularly the case in Canada, which arguably has some of the best anti-discriminatory policies on same-sex issues in the western world. So, in Francophone Quebec in 1977 'the amendment of human rights law to include sexual orientation became one of many sites for a new nationalist founding myth - one based on inclusion, openness, and a modernist discourse of progress' (Stychin, 1998: 91). This narrative of progress was evoked more recently for Canada as a whole when former Prime Minister Chretien announced that the federal government would accept same-sex marriage: 'There is evolution in society and according to the interpretation of the courts, they concluded these unions should be legal in Canada' (cited in *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 22 June 2003). Support for legal recognition of same-sex relationships and for gay marriage are frequently cited as a feature of Canadian national identity which distinguishes them from their conservative near neighbour, the United States (*Washington Post Foreign Service*, 22 June 2003; *New York Times*, 2 December 2003).

Similarly, Australian Opposition Leader Mark Latham has depicted issues of gay and lesbian equality as a sign of Australian social inclusion, despite his electoral caution over some issues such as same-sex marriage (*The Australian*, 2 June 2004). For example, he argues that 'the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras... is a celebration of the inclusive nature of the Australian people' (Latham, 2004c: 7). In a key speech

² My thanks to Terence Lee for drawing my attention to this example.

on national identity, Latham argued that improving the position of same-sex couples was part of the process of progressively extending traditional conceptions of Australian egalitarianism by 'widening the mateship circle' (Latham, 2004a). Senator Penny Wong, the first (and so far only) Australian Labor parliamentarian to come 'out' while in elected office, argued against Prime Minister Howard's attempts to ban adoption by gay parents on the grounds that since 'we accept now in Australia that we don't discriminate against people on the basis of their race or their class', so one shouldn't discriminate against people on the grounds of their sexuality. She also likened the government's bans on gay marriage to 1960's U.S. bans on interracial marriage (*The Australian*, 2 June 2004; see further Gerstmann, 2004: 78-84, 201).

The British Labour government has also incorporated issues of gay and lesbian equality into wider discourses of modernity, progress and social inclusion (Stychin, 2003: 25-47). Gays and Lesbian issues have become a symbol of the government's 'commitment to increased equality and social justice'. (Queen of England, 2003). Gay and lesbian rights are depicted as part of the unfinished business of modern democracy, as indeed they are as forms of discrimination against particular groups of citizens are progressively removed. In such discourse, gays and lesbians are no longer seen as symbolising deviance but are rather depicted as potentially being in loving and caring relationships (although civil partnerships are constructed as an alternative to same-sex marriage). Jacqui Smith, the British Deputy Minister for Women and Equality states that:

Today there are thousands of same-sex couples living in stable and committed relationships. These relationships span many years with couples looking after

each other, caring for their loved ones and actively participating in society; in fact, living in exactly the same way as any other family (Smith, 2003: Foreword).

Such arguments are very significant given that, as Senator Cardinale's references comparing same-sex partner's affection to being fond of one's dog reveal, moral right discourse normally denies empathy by denying that gays and lesbians can be in relationships just as loving as heterosexual ones. By contrast, Smith explicitly constructs gays and lesbians as objects of empathy, explaining the human consequences of non-recognition of same-sex relationships:

Many [same-sex partners] have been refused a hospital visit to see their seriously ill partner, or have been refused their rightful place at their partner's funeral.... Couples who have supported each other financially throughout their working lives often have no way of gaining pension rights. Grieving partners can find themselves unable to stay in their shared home or to inherit the possessions they have shared for years when one partner dies suddenly without leaving a will. In so many areas, as far as the law is concerned, same-sex relationships simply do not exist. That is not acceptable (Smith, 2003: Foreword).

Admittedly, gays and lesbians are still constructed as an 'other' that one should feel sympathy with – not as oneself: 'They are our families, our friends, our colleagues and our neighbours. Yet the law rarely recognises their relationship' (Smith, 2003: Foreword) [emphasis added]. Yet, 'we' are still being asked to empathise with 'them'

in a way that depicts gays and lesbians as a friendly and understandable 'other' rather than as a foreign and threatening stranger.

A similar view of same-sex relationships as caring has been provided by the leader of the Australian Labor Party, Mark Latham, who also constructs support for gay and lesbian rights as a sign of secularism.

I'm not a religious person. I'm agnostic....I don't think love in relationships is defined on religious grounds. As a general proposition, the basic ingredient of a good, successful relationship is love and care. Whether it is a same sex relationship or different sex relationship – I don't draw a distinction. (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 6-7 December 2003).

So gays and lesbians are increasingly incorporated into conceptions of caring, loving relationships and conceptions of social inclusion, economic progress and national identity. In a diverse range of political discourses, gay and lesbian rights have become a sign of social progress and of completing social justice agendas in which sexuality has been added to previous agendas of gender and race.

Contestation of signs or normalisation.

The previous analysis has shown what contested signs gay and lesbian issues are across many cultures – including a fundamental threat on one side, unfinished business of social inclusion and progress on the other. In fact, the discourses of unfinished business and increasing social justice illustrate precisely why some social

conservatives are so determined to draw a line in the sand over gay and lesbian issues – ‘Thus far and no further’.

There are also limits to how far the socially inclusive discourse goes. Carl Stychin points out that, despite the many advances in New Labour discourse, while gays and lesbians are frequently constructed as loved members of (heterosexual) families, queer family forms are more rarely acknowledged (Stychin, 2003: 33-4). It is also a regulatory discourse, with disciplinary aspects. New Labour discourse seeks to foster a new version (and image) of the good homosexual; one who is a good Third Way citizen with both rights and responsibilities (Stychin, 2003: 25-89), and those responsibilities include being employed, productive and supporting one’s partner financially when required. It is also a normalising discourse. In debates over issues such as same-sex marriage and civil partnerships, homosexuality is being ‘channelled into relationships that are about romantic love; part of a process of normalisation.’ Stychin cites Michael Warner’s fear that homosexual relations might be reconstructed by the dominant culture into a form of ‘banalised respectability’ and Katherine O’Donovan’s fear of ‘a kind of uniform monotony to our fates’ (Stychin, 2003: 37).

Or as Butler puts it, in the piece cited at the beginning of this paper: ‘What would it mean to exclude, from the field of potential legitimation those who are outside of marriage, those who live nonmonogamously, those who live alone, those who are in whatever arrangements they are in that are not the marriage form?’ (Butler, 2002: 27). Indeed, Butler fears that ‘options outside of marriage are becoming foreclosed as unthinkable, and...the terms of thinkability are enforced by the narrow debates over who and what will be included in the norm’ (Butler, 2002: 18). In such

respects marriage can operate as a form of (Foucauldian) governmentality, encouraging some forms of sexual activity and relationships and discouraging others. Furthermore, the debate over same-sex relationships still privileges forms of sexual relationships as a keystone of citizenship entitlements and risks denying benefits to people whose significant caring relationships are mediated through friendships rather than through sexual or familial relations (see further Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004).

It is here that the disadvantages of being a sign in somebody else's discourse can come to the fore as particular forms of relationships, and particular ways of relating within those relationships, are being encouraged by government. A practical example illustrates the dilemmas here. Welfare state benefits were originally constructed around a conception of the male wage-earner head of household in which one partner, the female, would be wholly or partly financially dependent (Pateman, 1996). Today, citizens in state-recognised sexual partnerships can still find their benefits substantially reduced or cut altogether as the couple's, rather than individual's, income is assessed.³ Same-sex partners could find their financial independence, and relations of equality, threatened as a result. Butler's concerns about normalisation therefore have both a practical and symbolic foundation.

³ This is particularly the case in countries where welfare/pension benefits are heavily means-tested as in Australia. However, even in the U.K. 'married and unmarried heterosexual couples co-habiting are entitled to £84.65 a week while two single people living together would get £53.95 each, a total of £107.90....If they have responsibility for a child they would receive £179.90 a week, including child benefits compared with just £120.65 for a married or unmarried heterosexual couple.' (Cited in *Gay Times* Feb 2003, 72).

However, despite such practical forms of normalisation, the detailed analysis of homophobic symbolism in this paper suggests that Butler and others may be over-emphasising just how normalising an issue same-sex marriage, or gays and lesbians being incorporated into conceptions of the family, is. For there is another side to Warner's fear of 'banalised respectability' and O'Donovan's fear of 'a kind of uniform monotony to our fates'. Banality and monotony can sometimes be far more destabilising to conventional signs than more radical challenges.

A good example of this was provided in Australia in the lead-up to the 2004 election. *Playschool* is one of the most long-running and respected children's television programmes. In June 2004, the programme (re-)aired a 30 second segment depicting a (real) family having an outing at an amusement park. In the voice-over, a child, Brenna says 'My mums are taking me and my friend Merryn to an amusement park' (*The Australian*, 10 June 2004). The two women are then shown waving to the children while they take various amusement park rides. That was all that was necessary to spark outrage by politicians. The Children's Minister, Health Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Communications Minister lined up to denounce the programme for showing inappropriate content for children (*The Australian*, 4 June 2004). Despite being on an official visit to Washington at the time (discussing issues such as the War in Iraq, torture allegations and Australian detainees in Guantanamo Bay) Prime Minister Howard joined in. He called the programme 'foolish' and particularly objected to 'that sort of issue' being injected 'as though it were a perfectly regular situation into a children's program' (*The Australian*, 7 June 2004). Even Mark Latham, the Labor leader who claims to see no difference between heterosexual and gay and lesbian relationships, eventually joined in, saying that

while he was happy for his children to learn about the diversity of Australian life, he preferred that parents be able to instruct children themselves (Latham, 2004b).

The reference to 'a perfectly regular situation' is an indication of just how troubling queered banality and everyday fates can be. In this context, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's defence that it was merely depicting the real diversity of families in Australian society (*The Australian*, 4 June 2004) or the Mums' defence that, in the words of *The Australian* newspaper, 'in their world, two mums and a sperm-donor gay father make them a perfectly normal, nuclear family' (*The Australian*, 5-6 June 2004) were precisely an articulation of why the Health Minister found the programme so 'shocking' (*The Australian*, 4 June 2004). Because there is another side to the issue of normalisation. It is the issue raised by Senator Boswell in the Australian Senate when he complained that attempts to remove so-called discrimination against gays and lesbians were in fact attempts to 'normalise' same-sex relationships and thereby, he claimed, encourage others to choose the same 'lifestyle' (*Senate Hansard*, 29 August 2001, 26925-7). Normalisation can work both ways, both restricting possibilities for alternative forms of sexual relationships and shifting the meanings of everyday conventional concepts like love, motherhood and family.

Social conservatives undoubtedly do find the very idea of same-sex marriage and gay parenting deeply threatening to the symbolic order. There is a sense in which reforms, however incomplete they are and whatever reservations we may have about their downsides, do challenge the conservative heteronormative symbolic, political order. Consequently, the analysis in this paper is somewhat less pessimistic than Butler's and, even more than Carl Stychin's (2003: 31, 41-47),

emphasises the profound ambiguity of what is occurring. A contestation of signs is taking place, not just between socially conservative and more inclusive discourses but also within discourses of normalisation themselves. In the process, it is not just institutions such as marriage that are being redefined but the very meaning of citizenship itself.

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