H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Robinson. *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 170 pp. $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-72200-9.

Reviewed by John Lauritsen (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Histsex (October, 2006)

The New Gay Conservatism

In America it was taken for granted that the gay movement came from and was part of the left. This perception changed dramatically in the 1990s, when institutions like the Log Cabin Republicans were founded, and openly gay conservatives made their voices heard. In *Queer Wars* (an unfortunate title) Paul Robinson, a humanities professor at Stanford, discusses a half dozen or so prominent gay conservatives–their ideas and the criticisms made by their opponents.

Although lesbian conservatives do exist, Robinson's subjects are all men; all are journalists who have written at least one book. Robinson admits that labelling them as "conservative" is a problem, since at least two of them would reject the label, and since any individual can hold opinions that are widely divergent on the political spectrum. For the purposes of his book, he defines three criteria: (1) "Gay conservatives repudiate the gay movement's affiliation with the left"; (2) "Gay conservatives seek to rescue homosexuality from its association with gender deviance–with effeminate men and mannish women"; and (3) "Gay conservatives reject what they consider the sexual license of the Gay Liberation movement and urge gays to restrain their erotic behavior." (p. 2)

There were earlier gay conservatives, like Marvin Liebman, who, towards the end of his life, wrote an autobiography, *Coming Out Conservative* (1992), but his approach was fundamentally different: "Liebman was not a gay conservative in the fashion of Sullivan and Bawer, who are interested less in enlightening right-wingers than in correcting the leftist bias of the gay establishment." (p. 4) A persistent theme of Robinson's is the de-radicalizing of the gay movement, largely as a consequence of AIDS. He argues that the two issues that have come to dominate gay politics–gay marriage and gays in the military–were placed on the table by gay conservatives. These two causes, which "found no place in the original platform of Gay Liberation," reflect a desire "to enter into the most traditional structures of our society" (pp. 6-7).

Robinson first looks at a 1989 book, *After The Ball*, a response to the horrors of the AIDS epidemic. In his view, the authors, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen, inappropriately "adopt a jaunty, irreverent tone of voice

and offer their remedies in the relentlessly upbeat language of a television infomercial" (p. 10). Kirk and Madsen object to (1) the leftist leanings of the gay movement, (2) public displays of "effeminacy" and (3) the excessive "sexual indulgence" of the 1970s, which includes not only promiscuity but also kinky sex acts. To counter unfavorable impressions of gay men, they propose mounting a public relations campaign, for which they designed model advertisements. They believe that gays should never project themselves in ways that might be threatening to straight Americans, but should rather portray themselves as victims–the rationale being that straights will help gays from a sense of compassion.

Kirk and Madsen particularly object to the various and sundry alliances made by the gay movement, from socialist revolutionaries to the Fat Liberation Front. They favor a single-issue approach–exactly (though Robinson doesn't mention this) as did the founders of the Gay Activists Alliance, when they split from the multi-issue Gay Liberation Front in the fall of 1969.

Next Robinson considers Bruce Bawer, whose 1993 book, *A Place At The Table*, addresses the same themes as Kirk and Madsen, but "in a categorically more thoughtful and serious frame of mind" (p. 16). For much of the 1980s Bawer, then in the closet, wrote for *American Spectator*, but quit when the magazine, after having run several anti-gay articles, refused to run his own review of the AIDS film, *Longtime Companion* (1990). Fairly or not, the label "sex-negative" has been applied to Bawer, who consistently downplays sex as opposed to love. In one instance he reacted squeamishly, even hysterically, to a photograph of two handsome young men, stripped to the waist, in an erotic embrace. His statement–"I'm a monogamous, churchgoing Christian" (p. 42)–says it all. Bawer returned to Christianity via John Boswell, whose influential book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Christianity* (1980), argues that nothing in the Christian tradition is inherently anti-gay.[1]

Next in line is Andrew Sullivan, former editor of the *New Republic* and author of two books: *Virtually Normal: An Argument about Homosexuality* (1995) and *Love Undetectable: Notes on Friendship, Sex, and Survival* (1998). Sullivan is the best known of the gay conservatives, having achieved fame and notoriety through his own web log (or "blog"), on which, among other things, "he has been obsessed with promoting the U.S. war against Iraq" (p. 44). Sullivan divides thinking about homosexuality into four schools, which he calls prohibitionist, conservative, liberal, and liberationist–each of which he considers to be wrong. Curiously, for a gay man, he shows considerable respect for the first two categories, the most homophobic. After disposing of the four outmoded traditions, Sullivan advances his own approach, a version of nineteenth-century liberalism, which may be called libertarian. The gist of it is a rejection of identity politics and a rejection of state intervention into the private sector. To discuss all of the many issues involved here would be beyond the scope of the present review. Suffice it to say that Robinson thoroughly and fairly examines Sullivan's ideas, and does not hesitate to say that a particular argument is illogical or even "daffy."

Like Bruce Bawer, Sullivan relies on John Boswell's magnum opus "to dispose of the biblical objections to homosexuality" (p. 47). Sullivan has become a vociferous advocate of gay marriage, which he believes will cut down on promiscuity. At the same time, Sullivan himself has been criticized by the neo-conservative William Bennett, for advocating gay "adultery." He appears to be deeply conflicted about his own sexuality. In 2001 journalist Michelangelo Signorile published an article, "The Contradictory Faces of Andrew Sullivan," which charged that Sullivan had advertised for bareback sex on the Web. Signorile gloated over "the sheer incongruity between the public persona that many rightly or wrongly perceive as Sullivan's–conservative, moral, devoutly Catholic, marriage-minded ... arrogant toward the ghettoized gay scene–and the person depicted on the sites ... someone very much in the gay sexual fast lane" (quoted, p. 77). Sullivan responded with an essay, "Sexual McCarthyism", which (though not denying the truth of the facts) accused Signorile of unconscionably invading his privacy (p. 77).

Andrew Sullivan's masculinism expresses itself in his beliefs that gay men have much more in common with straight men than they do with lesbians. Believing that gay men are natural soldiers, he places the right to serve in the military (along with the right to marry) at the heart of his ideal gay politics.

No fewer than three books have been written to rebut Sullivan's arguments. If Robinson is sharply critical of some of his ideas, he is not soft on their critics either. He finds Urvashi Vaid's *Virtual Equality* (1995) vague and half-hearted, offering "only the most tepid criticism of the new gay right" (p. 89). Michael Warner, a leading "queer theorist", offers "an unembarrassed apology for the most radical and disruptive vision of queer life" (p. 89) in his book, *The Trouble with Normal* (1999), which is "a defense of the sexual lumpenpropetariat" (p. 90).[2]

Richard Goldstein's *The Attack Queers* (2002) is tendentiously sloppy, "short on argument and long on insult" (p. 94).

Robinson's final two gay conservatives are Michelangelo Signorile and Gabriel Rotello, two New Yorkers who left ACT-Up to found the short-lived publication, *Out Week*. Acknowledging that both men consider themselves to be leftists, Robinson has put them in the conservative camp solely on the basis of sex-negativism. Signorile is the better known, having gained notoriety for his practice of "outing" prominent gay men, and also for his strenuous advocacy of the word "queer" as a replacement for "gay." Robinson demonstrates that Signorile's thinking is often muddled and even hypocritical. To the charge that "outing" is an invasion of another person's privacy, Signorile responded: "Sex is private. But by outing we do not discuss anyone's sex life. We only say they're gay" (quoted, p. 106).

Queer Wars succeeds in its task: reporting on gay conservatism, an American political tendency of the late twentieth century. It is well written, well argued, and admirably concise. My only reservations are that forerunners in the past have been ignored, and many issues have been raised, but not fully discussed. I have in mind such issues as poppers and other "gay" drugs, disputes over the nature and etiology of AIDS, bisexuality and marriage, the nature of "effeminacy" vs. "masculinity," debates on the word "queer," and so on. Admittedly, if Robinson had gone into these it would have made for a much longer and more cumbersome book.

To give an example, *Queer Wars* begins with the statement: "The gay movement began on the left. Gay Liberation was the third major social eruption, after the civil rights and women's movements, to emerge out of the dissident political culture of the 1960s." This is true, up to a point, but the left-gay alliance goes back much further, at least to 13 January 1898, when August Bebel, the great leader of the German Social-Democratic Party, took the floor of the Reichstag to argue for the abolition of Germany's sodomy statute, Paragraph 175.[3] In the century since then, the gay movement flourished, almost died out in the 1930s, then revived in the "homophile" (1950-1969) and "gay liberation" (1969 onwards) manifestations. Although the gay cause is generally assumed to be on the left end of the political spectrum, there have been articulate gay conservatives (such as Benedict Friedlaender and Adolf Brandt) since the end of the nineteenth century.

Notes

[1]. Critiques of Boswell's work are available on the Gay & Lesbian Humanists web site: <http://galha.org/ptt/lib/hic/index.html$> $.

[2]. *Lumpenproletariet* is a German word used by Marx and Engels to signify the class of people below the working class. Such English words as "trash," "criminal class," and "riff-raff" convey some of the contempt and hatred that Marx and Engels expressed towards this class. In classical American sociology, the *lumpenpropetariat* is equivalent to the lower-lower class.

[3]. John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement: 1864-1935* (New York: Times Change Press, 1974).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-histsex

Citation: John Lauritsen. Review of Robinson, Paul, *Queer Wars: The New Gay Right and Its Critics*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12357

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.