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Towards an Understanding of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Through Queer Assimilationism

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Abstract

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) policy marks an important moment in the history of queer rights in the United States of America—while outwardly ending the military’s ban on Queer servicemembers, the protections this policy offers hinges on any given servicemember’s willingness to conceal their queer identity. Historical research on the American queer rights movement contextualizes this era of policy within a broader move away from the radicalism of its past and towards demands of queer into inclusion into previously exclusive facets of American life. This presents space for analysis into how and why this rhetorical shift occurs, and consequently with what effectiveness this shift presents to the demands expressed by the American queer rights movement. Utilizing Michel Foucault’s conception of *interest*, this paper argues for an understanding of DADT through the *interest* generating potential of this rhetorical shift that makes possible the aims of DADT. Through widespread adoption of strategies aimed at aligning queer identities with heteronormative ideals, the American queer rights movement defines ‘the right to

fight' as an addressable issue, and thus makes possible a policy which acts upon this issue. This stresses the importance of interest theory in the analysis of the American queer rights movement, and thus contributes to an understanding of how social movements affect change.

Keywords: DADT, Assimilationism, Interest Theory

ON DECEMBER 21, 1993, The United States Department of Defense issued a new directive on the subject of “Qualification Standards for Enlistment, Appointment, and Induction.” A major consequence of this directive was the introduction of ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ (DADT). DADT, as a policy which guided military legislation until the policy’s dissolution in 2011, stipulated that “[armed forces] applicants ... shall not be asked or required to reveal their sexual orientation” however, “homosexual conduct may be grounds for barring entry into the armed forces” (DOD 1993, 1–5). The dissolution of DADT followed a decline in the actual use of this policy for the purposes of discharging openly gay service members. This fact provides a point of departure for elucidating a split in belief amongst the Queer rights movement who find themselves at the whim of such policy. Undoubtedly, decreased persecution of queer peoples in any respect is progress for American queer rights. To the antimilitarist, however, this fact mirrors an expansion of the U.S. military in potential personnel and thus contributes to furthering problematic American overseas incentives (Rimmerman 2014). The American Queer rights movement found a broad base of support amongst the political unrest of late 1960s American life—particularly anti-Vietnam war organizing (Suran 2001). How is it, then, that this movement found itself just 30 years later arguing for the right to participate in such military action?

‘The right to fight’ is an ongoing point of contention within the American Queer rights movement: it seeks to define what the goals of the movement should be, and thus what Queer rights should ideally look like. Should Queerness conform to the heterosexual standard in all but sexual identity, or should it reject this standard and seek to embody more radical critique of American life? If we know that disparate perspectives on military participation exist within the American Queer rights movement, how is it that we can understand DADT as a response to a seemingly unified call for ‘the right to fight’? To answer this, I suggest that we can understand this moment in American Queer rights with respect to the networks of knowledge production that inform it. I posit that we can understand this through employing Michel Foucault’s conception of interest. My analysis will argue for an understanding of DADT policy informed, and thus made possible, by a specific rhetoric of Queer rights advocacy; the aforementioned ‘right to fight.’ I will term this the ‘DADT era of activism.’ This is done with the intention of showing that the Queer rights movement is not determined by any one legislative policy or act, but rather the broader social movements to which these policies or acts respond to. It is in this sense that both the enacting of DADT and its dissolution can both be viewed as acting in the same direction of progress, in that the ‘right to fight’ becomes the dominant definition of progress within the American Queer rights movement. I will be using an article by American activist Barbara Smith titled “Where’s the Revolution?” as a discursive artifact, as well as several histories of the American Queer rights movement during this era, to inform an understanding of the adoption of the ‘right to fight’ amongst a changing landscape of advocacy preceding and following DADT. The adoption of the ‘right to fight’ rhetoric, and the interest generating potential it represents, thus makes DADT possible as an attempt to address this end. This, ultimately, will stress the importance of interest generation as a key concept for analysis of the DADT era of the American Queer rights movement.

Terminology

In this paper I use the term Queer when referring to sexual or gender identities that do not conform to heteronormative ideas; in my practice this is a catchall term. When applicable I will use more pointed terms to convey the relevance of specific identities as might be present in the texts discussed. When speaking of DADT, for example, I will use the term LGB¹ as it portrays the limited scope of identities under the regulation of such policy. In analysis of the article by Smith, ‘lesbian and gay’ is used, thus when discussing this text I will use the same phraseology.

Applying Interest Theory to American Queer Rights

To understand DADT policy as it relates to the discourse of Queer-rights activism, I will be using Foucault’s conception of interest as a theoretical framework. Interest is a power constituted by “that respect in which a given individual, thing, wealth, and so on interests other individuals or the collective body of individuals” (Foucault 2008, 45). In other words, interest is a social power whose effectiveness to act toward a given end operates with the population’s desire to see that end met. Interest is a concept taken from Foucault’s series of lectures at the Collège de France, particularly in the volumes adapted from his lecture series of 1977 through 1979. Generally, Foucault’s work centers around understanding *how* power operates and not *who* possesses power. Among many things, these lectures concern themselves with understanding the development of the ‘technologies of power’ underpinning a contemporary conception of governance. So, what is a technology of power, how does it relate to interest, and what does this concept make possible for analyses of social movements?

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual. Exclusive of nonconforming and Trans peoples.

The idea of technologies of power is born from an analytic methodology that seeks to avoid reductions of power to those dynamics originating within the institution, the state notwithstanding. Indeed, "...the state, doubtless no more today than in the past, does not have this unity, individuality, and rigorous functionality, nor, I would go so far as to say, this importance" (Foucault 2008, 109). For Foucault, an analysis of the state, or any institution for that matter, as the progenitor of power leads to a reduction in the complexity of how power operates. It thus becomes necessary to "move outside the institution [so as to] replace it with the overall view of the technology of power" (Foucault 2007, 109). To demonstrate this methodology, Foucault (2007) gives the example of military discipline:

"We may say that the disciplinarization [referring to the process by which the military is constituted as a unified force through the process of disciplinary action] of the army is due to its control by the state. However, when disciplinarization is connected, not with a concentration of state control, but with the problem of floating populations, the importance of commercial networks, technical inventions, ... community management, a whole network of alliance, support, and communication constitutes the 'genealogy' of military discipline." (2007, 119)

This is to say that the disciplinarization of the military is not imposed by 'the state,' but is rather constituted by several intersecting actors. Returning this example to interest, we might say that these intersecting factors each act as an interest-generator: they affect a continuation of military disciplinarization based on the aspirations that are met through this exertion of power.

Interest, then, is a technology of power open to utilization by social actors on the pretense that there is potential in existing collective aspirations *or* potential

to shape said aspirations. An example of interest as it relates to Queer rights might yield through historical analysis a history of medicine, organized religion, or military rhetoric negatively affecting interest in Queer rights. However, interest as a technology of power is not built upon any one institution involved in the proliferation of negative interest. Certainly, such institutions will act through interest generation to incite against Queer rights, but so too can Queer rights advocates positively affect the same interest in Queer rights to pursue their own goals. Thus, interest is a technology of power that can be utilized by any number of actors or institutions to affect social change. Understanding rhetorical shifts in American Queer rights activism will allow for a history of the interest-generation projects within the Queer rights movement that can contextualize the history of DADT as a policy.

A History of Discourse within the American Queer Rights Movement

Aaron Belkin (2003), an advocate for the repeal of DADT, states that DADT differs as a policy from its other discriminatory predecessors in that, on paper, it protects LGB applicants from questions regarding sexuality (109). In practice however, this was oftentimes disregarded, and these practices of questioning continued off-record (Servicemembers Legal Defense Network as cited in Lehring 2003, 138; Werner 2014). The official justification for this continued ban of ‘outness’ cites ‘unit cohesion’ as a priority that is fundamentally threatened by the presence of openly LGB servicemembers, despite evidence to the contrary (Belkin 2003, 109, 110–16; Estes 2005; National Defense Research Institute 2010, 157). Indeed, what served to ‘maintain camaraderie’ was often detrimental to that end in that it required secrecy on the part of LGB servicemembers (Trivette 2010). Belkin (2003) notes a commonality amongst rhetorical justification of this policy. Often, there is a reliance upon anecdotal evidence supporting a vision of ‘out’ LGB

peoples as overtly solicitous and disruptive of the heteronormative environment central to unit cohesion (2003, 116-117). These rhetorical justifications are part of a much broader history of homophobic sentiment; formally beginning with the criminalization of sodomy in World War I's 'Articles of War' sentiment and state regulation which thereafter saw expansion of its narrative beyond the homosexual act. This negative sentiment and regulation act to form the homosexual identity, or what Gary Lehring (2003) in his work on gay military identity terms the "official gay" (2003, 15–17). The transition from public conception of homosexuality as an act in isolation to an essentialized character flaw had a drastic impact on the lives of servicemembers discharged for homosexuality. The 'GI Bill,'² for instance, was one of the most consequential welfare acts of the postwar period pertaining to military veterans and servicemembers. This legislation, however, contained clauses that exempted those discharged for homosexuality, denying them benefits such as guaranteed tuition, unemployment pay, and low-interest housing and business loans based on the immutable character of this officially gay identity (Altschuler and Blumin 2009; Canaday 2003).

The Assimilationist Turn

Belkin's (2003) work represents a perspective that seeks to normalize Queer identities within the status quo by arguing for inclusion of Queer identities into facets of American life such as military service or marriage law. In much of the literature concerning itself with understanding this shift in the broader American Queer rights movement, this is called 'homonormativity' (Montegary 2015). 'Homonormativity' is a concept authored by Lisa Duggan (2004) in their work on racial and gender inequalities during the neoliberal politics of the 1990s and is used to describe the creation of a Queer identity that is palatable to the rightward shift

² The 'GI Bill' is a colloquial name for various pieces of legislation, all serving the end of servicemember reintegration into civilian life. See Editor's Note in Altschuler & Blumin (2009).

of that era (Duggan 2004; Werner 2014). Homonormativity embraces the immutable ‘official gay,’ opting to replace this identity’s segregated status with ‘a seat at the table.’ This perspective is what Queer American historian Craig A. Rimmerman (2014) refers to as ‘assimilationism’. This perspective generally seeks to “work within the system” to “let us in,” or attempts to affect inclusion of Queer identities previously excluded from existing structures due to historical discrimination (Rimmerman 2014, 5). Activists who maintain critique of these structures beyond their exclusivity of Queer peoples, opting instead to ‘live outside of’ as protest of broader issues associated with these structures, identify as ‘liberationists.’ This split in belief is readily apparent in the issue of Queer military participation.

The Liberationist Perspective

In her July 1993 article “Where’s the Revolution?” Barbara Smith reflects on the March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation of April 25th, 1993, eight months before the enactment of DADT. This march was organized around several demands, among them (and the most notable in the context of DADT) the passage of a “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender civil rights bill and an end to discrimination by state and federal governments including the military...” (March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation 1993). Smith’s article centers this demand as a major point of contention, and thus elucidates the split in belief structure between those subscribing to the assimilationist tendency and those, like Smith, who argue for a liberationist approach:

Nobody sane would want any part of the established order. It was the system—white supremacist, misogynistic, capitalist and homophobic—that had made our lives so hard to begin with. We wanted something entirely new. Our movement was called lesbian

and gay *liberation*, and more than a few of us, especially women and people of color, were working for a *revolution*. (Smith 1993)

The liberationist perspective rejects inclusion into structures which are themselves responsible for the entrenchment and reproduction of white, hetero-patriarchal dominance. Liberationists see assimilationism as turning away from revolutionary action as a core goal of the American Queer rights movement. To Smith (1993), liberationism necessarily includes antimilitarism: “we need a nuanced and principled politics that fights discrimination and at the same time criticizes U.S. militarism and its negative effect on social justice and world peace.” The ‘right to fight,’ contrasts with the liberationist vision Smith is advocating. In adopting beliefs at odds with a liberationist perspective, the March on Washington cedes points that existed previously within these circles of broader, revolution-oriented critique. Smith (1993) states:

In fact, it’s gay white men’s racial, gender and class privileges, as well as the vast numbers of them who identify with the system rather than distrust it, that have made the politics of the current gay movement so different from those of other identity-based movements for social and political change.

Liberationism, then, seeks not to work within the field of the homonormative identity as does an assimilationist tendency, but instead problematizes this identity as fraught with the otherizations native to a broader American milieu.

Assimilationism as the Prevailing Strategy

This assimilationist tendency, and the current gay movement to which Smith states it is attributed to, is otherwise well documented in literature pertaining to activism under neoliberalism. Duggan’s (2004) work on the ‘equality politics’ of the 1990s and early 2000s, we can further elucidate the motives for such an adoption

of assimilationist tendencies in Queer rights advocacy. A rhetorical shift towards a “‘multiculturalism’ compatible with the global aspirations of U.S. business interests” is incentivized via the greater efficacy of interest generation such rhetoric enables (Duggan 2004, 44). Duggan (2004) uses the example of the Human Rights Campaign’s³ (HRC) ‘Millennium March on Washington,’ an event drawing on the marches discussed by Smith, in that it acted seemingly more as a public relations media campaign, relying on corporate sponsorships and top-down organizing rather than grassroots organizing previously common to the American Queer rights movement (2004, 45-46). Liz Montegary (2015) further documents the HRC’s promotion of ‘right to fight’ rhetoric in the appointment of Eric Alva as the spokesperson for their DADT repeal efforts. As a gay marine who has suffered injury during his time in the military, Alva’s experience works to “align gay American identity with a militarized form of self-reliant masculinity and sacrificial nationalism” (Montegary 2015, 906). This promotion of a hero figure became a common rhetorical strategy, and thus provides an effective rhetorical strategy for homonormative actors. Following the September 11th attacks, Maggie Werner (2014) states that America found widespread cultural support for renewed military action that oftentimes coalesced around masculinized ‘heroes’ that signified “American values of justice, fairness, and equality”. Thus, the hero mythos is a site of potential interest-generation that dominant actors within the assimilationist movement were able to make effective use of to promote homonormativity through deploying certain cultural myths.

This promotion of the homonormative vision as the goal of Queer rights movements does not seek to address intersecting structural oppressions that some within the broader Queer movement contest as necessary for substantial change. Rather, it shifts the ends in such a way that they are more attainable through interest.

³ “The richest national gay and lesbian civil rights lobby in Washington, D.C.” (Duggan 2004, 45).

This critique of homonormativity is at the very center of Smith's (1993) writing: assimilationism entering the mainstream as "the new gay political equation" has created an environment in which the official gay becomes a severely limited identity. It is similarly true that this vision of identity is that which becomes the most visible. Thus, we can understand the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy preceding DADT as the stirrings of a movement which seeks to become a more palatable interest-generating actor through embracing and promoting the homonormative identity. This rhetorical shift lends itself to demystifying the inception of 'the right to fight'. This end, and the policy that attempted to address it, is an artifact of the interest generation associated with the assimilationist turn in Queer advocacy.

Limitations & Directions for Future Study

Rights movements such as that discussed in this paper are complex social actors. It is beneficial to recognize that rhetoric is never adopted with perfect unity, nor is it clear what outcomes particular rhetoric can lead to—we cannot be aware of all the intimate details involved in technologies of power that we might unwittingly be beholden to. What I have argued is not that the assimilationist turn in Queer rights advocacy is to be faulted for DADT policy or for the continuing discrimination of the officially gay identity. Technologies of power are not constituted by any single social movement or institution. Despite the effort I make to contextualize Smith's work via contemporary Queer theories and social movement histories, Smith's article offers analysis of only one social movement involved in the era preceding the drafting of DADT policy —and thus only one facet of the interest surrounding American Queer rights. To this end, scholars concerned with this policy and the discursive context surrounding it make note of intense lobbying on the part of the 'evangelical right' as influential in the drafting of this policy and responsible for the compromised policy that lacked improvement for the lives of Queer servicemembers (Lehring 2003, 137; Werner 2014). If more

work were to be done to understand the interest behind DADT policy, examining this site of interest generation would prove insightful and contribute to a more robust understanding of this policy as well as the future of queer advocacy.

Conclusion

My argumentation shows that this policy could not be formed without something informing it—without something pushing for the ends that this policy found itself trying to reach. This ‘something,’ in my scope of analysis, is the popularization of assimilationist ‘right to fight’ rhetoric within the American Queer rights movement. In this way, the rhetorical strategies of these advocates contributed greatly to a discourse that legitimized the legalization of LGB participation in the military, to which DADT policy *and* its eventual repeal had set as its aims.

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