

Homosexuality - A Freedom Too Far

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On the Normalization of Homosexuality

Dr. Socarides, an official body of your own profession, the American Psychiatric Association, declared in 1973 that homosexuality was not a disorder.

Yes, that was a turning point. But our scientific integrity had been eroded in pursuit of a false freedom.

It was a political movement?

Yes. In 1970, gay activists made the first systematic effort to disrupt the annual meetings of the APA by flocking in to our sessions in San Francisco. In a panel on transsexualism and homosexuality, they denounced my colleague, Irving Bieber, and showered his presentation with derisive laughter. One protester called him "a motherf---er." Bieber took this very hard. He'd been working all these years to help these people and--

And now they were putting him under attack?

He got off easy. They actually broke up another meeting. One protester tried to read a list of gay demands. Most of the psychiatrists left the room. Those of us who stayed, heard our profession denounced as an instrument of oppression and torture.

Then what happened?

Gays demanded a spot on the official program of our next annual meeting, in May 1971, in Washington, D.C. Otherwise, they threatened to break up the whole convention with their own terrorist tactics. Our 1971 program chairman, John Ewing, quickly agreed. That told gay activists they could get what they wanted from "the shrinks" by using calculated violence and threats.

Sure enough, when the 1971 convention rolled around, gays stormed the podium during a solemn Convocation of Fellows. Frank Kameny, who was always a key strategist in this whole thing, grabbed a microphone and issued a manifesto. "Psychiatry is the enemy incarnate. Psychiatry has waged a relentless war of extermination against us. You may take this as a declaration of war against you." He demanded that gays be allowed to put on their own presentation.

And the APA let them do so?

Yes. We wanted to hear them out. And they gave us a pret-

ty good preview of a line they would follow for the next 20 years. Kameny said, "We're rejecting you all as our owners. We possess ourselves and we speak for ourselves and we will take care of our own destinies." Larry Littlejohn, representing the Society for Individual Rights in San Francisco, said, "I think the homosexual lifestyle for those people who want to live it, is beautiful and I think it should be appreciated ... for many people, hundreds of thousands of people, [it] is a valid, healthy ... lifestyle."

Did anyone argue with that?

No. We were all too intimidated. Some psychiatrists capitulated right on the spot. They pleaded with the gay panelists. "Don't think," they said, "that we're all followers of Bieber and Socarides."

They sound like wimps.

Many of them didn't know what they were doing. They didn't treat homosexuals. And so, they couldn't describe, much less understand, what was at stake. As a class, psychoanalysts who are also M.D.s like to stay out of the limelight. They'd rather not get involved in politics of any kind--not really understanding that other elements in society cannot make decisions for society without some input from our profession.

Who needs help from the psychoanalytic community?

Men and women in law, education, religion and the media. But I am sorry to say that we're just not giving them much help these days.

Why not?

Because of this story that I am trying to tell. We let ourselves be intimidated by the gay activists.

We were talking about the APA giving the gay activists their own panel at the 1971 APA convention.

Yes. When the gay panelists challenged the APA delegates to "break the monopoly" enjoyed by those who said homosexuality was a disorder, a small minority inside the APA began laying plans to see how they could re-classify homosexuality--that is, take it off the APA's list of disorders.

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This was in 1971?

Yes. But the time was not yet ripe. It would get riper after our next annual meeting in Dallas in 1972, when spokesmen like Frank Kameny started taking a new, more reasoned tack. Kameny handed out a flier asking that the profession engage in discussions with the gay community--"of our problem with us," as he put it. He added: "Psychiatry ... has been the major single obstacle in our society to the advancement of homosexuals and to the achievement of our full rights, our full happiness and our basic human dignity. Psychiatry can become our major ally."

The flier called upon the profession to renounce "the sickness theory" and join with gays in their attempts to reform public opinion, support legal reform and equal opportunity legislation. Kameny's flier proclaimed the movement's slogans: *Gay, Proud and Healthy and Gay Is Good*. The flier ended with the declaration that "with you or without you" we will work toward their acceptance and "fight those who oppose us."

How did that go over?

Many of us could go along with *some* of Kameny's goals. We deplored society's unreasoned fear of homosexuals, and we certainly didn't want to deny them equal opportunity. But we didn't see how we could renounce our own research and our own long experience with homosexuals whose imperative needs made for a lifestyle that was anything but healthy. But something else emerged in that Dallas meeting--the revelation that there were gays inside our own profession. Barbara Gittings, a long-time lesbian activist and chair of the Task Force on Gay Liberation of the American Library Association, gave a presentation that told us about gay psychiatrists who lived anguished lives, terrified at the prospect of professional ruin if anyone exposed them.

She was followed by a Dr. Anonymous who wore a hood, a move calculated to win sympathy, because it dramatized his fears of persecution. He announced, "I am homosexual. I am a psychiatrist." He called upon his fellow gays who were present to join the struggle for change. He called upon the rest of us to accept them.

Could you do that?

Up to a point. We could accept them if they were struggling to change themselves. But it became increasingly clear that this minority inside the profession was asking for things that would hurt homosexuals in the long run, and subvert society in the process. Excuse me. They weren't asking. They were demanding. Their road to acceptance was a road of intimidation and attack. We weren't ready for that. No one stood up to gainsay any of those calling for acceptance at any cost. We were doctors, not politicians. And these people were not talking about the power of reason. They were talking about the power of power.

Dr. Judd Marmor, a psychiatrist from UCLA, launched a vitriolic attack on me for an article that I had just published in JAMA, The Journal of the American Medical Association. He called it "an unfortunate potpourri of prejudice and misinformation [which] stems ... from obvious personal prejudices."

And of course you responded?

I did. But not at Dallas. When I got home, I proposed to the New York County District Branch of the American Psychiatric Association that the Branch should establish its own local task force to educate our profession and the public on the nature, meaning and content of homosexuality. It was done with the enthusiastic support of our then president, Dr. Bernard Diamond, who, unfortunately, died in 1971. Our group lunged into two years of deliberations. It was an impressive bunch, a dozen experts affiliated with the major medical centers of New York City--the first all-psychiatric group ever to study homosexuality. We had 16 plenary meetings. In late 1972, we submitted our report. It called for civil rights for homosexuals. But it also said they were suffering from a disorder of psychosexual development.

The District Branch liked your report?

No. The Executive Committee (headed by gays) wouldn't allow us to read the report at a meeting of the District Branch. And it dissolved our Task Force.

On what grounds?

Simple politics. At the national level, a group of politically active psychiatrists--some of them gay--was forming. They called themselves the Committee for a Concerned Psychiatry (CFCP). Over the next few years, their lobbying and their electioneering led to a seizure of the presidency and the chairs of the APA. They gave strong support to Alfred Freedman for his election as president of the APA, and it really made a difference: in an election where more than 10,000 voted, Dr. Freedman won by two votes. Then the CFCP helped to set into the presidency--which, with the support of the CFPC, they did. Then each of them--Freedman, Spiegel and Marmor--later delivered what the CFCP wanted; they each played important roles in the move to delete homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.

But there was something in the air anyway, wasn't there? Gays were beginning to have more of an influence in America.

Yes. The Executive Committee of the APA put their wet fingers to the breeze and they felt the blowing of a new wind. It wasn't much of a wind, and, considering it was blowing in from the San Francisco Bay Area, the Executive Committee might have used a little more discrimination. But they didn't.

What was blowing in from San Francisco?

Two straws. In 1971, the San Francisco chapter of the National Association for Mental Health adopted, under the prodding of two lesbian activists, a resolution declaring that "homosexuality can no longer be equated only with sickness, but may properly be considered as a preference, orientation, or propensity for certain kinds of lifestyles." In 1972, under pressure from the same quarters, the Golden Gate Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers adopted a similarly worded resolution. The point is that the leadership of the APA (who are, naturally, more politically inclined than the general membership) thought they saw the beginning of a trend. They could also tell the membership that there was trouble ahead if they didn't go along with that trend. It seemed to me that they were advocating the easy way out.

Since many of them were not directly involved in the treatment of sexual pathologies themselves, they found it expedient to retreat behind their ignorance--and leave those of us who were involved high and dry.

And then what happened?

The next thing we heard was that in mid-1973, the president of the American Psychiatric Association, John Spiegel, and the vice president, Judd Marmor, had brought the Nomenclature Committee of the APA to a meeting at Columbia University with representatives of the Gay Activist Alliance, the Mattachine Society, and the Daughters of Bilitis to discuss the deletion of homosexuality from the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual*. I discovered later that the chairman of the Nomenclature Committee, Dr. Henry Brill, had been shunted aside on this matter, and a new subgroup was formed, the Nomenclature Task Force on Homosexuality, to be headed by Dr. Robert Spitzer, a psychiatrist from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Anybody call you in?

Hardly. I heard nothing until November of 1973, when a reporter from Newsweek asked if I were invited to attend the upcoming celebration/cocktail party scheduled for December 15 or 16 at the APA headquarters in Washington, D.C., and whether I would care to comment on it.

A party to celebrate what?

He said, "the greatest of gay victories--the purging of homosexuality from the realm of psychiatry."

The purging was done that quickly and that quietly?

Yes. And here is how they did it. I am indebted to Ronald Bayer of Columbia University for some of the story that follows. When Bayer was a fellow of the Hastings Institute in New York, he did an entire book on this APA affair, called

Homosexuality and American Psychiatry.

Was that a fair account?

It was an objective report that didn't take sides. That's why I like to quote Bayer's conclusions. He wrote a story of how the American Psychiatric Association "had fallen victim to the disorder of a tumultuous era, when disruptive elements threatened to politicize every aspect of American social life. A furious egalitarianism ... compelled psychiatric experts to negotiate the pathological status of homosexuality with homosexuals themselves. The result was not a conclusion based on an approximation of the scientific truth as dictated by reason, but was instead an action demanded by the ideological temper of the times."

And Spitzer was a major character in that story?

Yes. Decidedly. The Spitzer you meet in Bayer's book is someone who crosses far over the line, from science to open advocacy of a political position. Bayer tells us that Spitzer had never even published a paper on homosexuality. But now he presumed to write a position paper for the Nomenclature Committee about the meaning and content of homosexuality.

I don't get it. If Spitzer was so new to this ballgame, what made him so confident he could play in the big leagues?

He brought in some ringers to go to bat for him with testimony to the Committee--Wardell Pomeroy and Alan Bell, two sluggers from the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University. That was the Kinsey Institute, which had long been in sympathy with the view that homosexuality was "normal."

These were Dr. Alfred Kinsey's people?

Yes. They weren't even psychiatrists. They knew nothing about the origin and dynamics of homosexuality. They were sociologists, and, as bean counters, all they could say was that "a certain number of folks just like to mate with members of their own sex." Spitzer also brought in Charles Silverstein, a gay psychologist. (He would later collaborate on a book called *The Joy of Gay Sex*.) On February 8, 1973, Spitzer had Silverstein up before the Nomenclature Committee to present an array of citations which were meant to prove that the classification of homosexuality was "inconsistent with a scientific perspective." He incorrectly leaned on an interpretation of early work on animal sexual behavior, especially in primates, by two Yale anthropologists, Cleland Ford and Frank Beach.

This 1950-51 research by Ford and Beach ended up proving that there was an inherent biological tendency in all animals toward "an inversion of sexual behavior?" And that, therefore, same-sex sex is "natural?"

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They didn't prove that. Not really. Ford and Beach reported animals engaged in same-sex mounting behavior. Other anthropologists challenged the conclusion that this activity was really sexual. They thought it may have had more to do with aggression and submission.

Who really knows?

To really know about motivation, you'd have to put a monkey on the couch and ask him what he was doing. We can't do that--yet. But I think it's enough to quote Frank Beach in 1971, twenty years after his original research. He told the author, Arno Karlen, "I don't know any authenticated instances of males or females in the animal world preferring a homosexual partner, if by homosexuality you mean complete sexual relationships including climax It's questionable that mounting in itself can be properly called sexual."

So what about sex in the animal kingdom?

The media speak with a certain amusement about "gender-bending" activity among humans. But scientists are not amused by gender-bending in the animal world. "In the gender-bending waters of Lake Apopka, alligators aren't quite male. They aren't quite female either. They may be both. Or neither."

You're reading from a news report?

Yes, from a long piece headlined "Sexual Confusion in the Wild" that ran in *The Los Angeles Times* on October 2, 1994. The story quotes a good number of scientists who are alarmed.

By what?

According to *The Times'* environment writer, Marla Cone, "Elsewhere around the world, the same astonishing phenomenon is turning up in a menagerie of fish, birds and other wild animals. Testosterone levels have plummeted in some males, while females are supercharged with estrogen. Both sexes are sometimes born with a penis and ovaries, and some males wind up so gender warped they try to produce eggs. "Everything is really fouled up. It is indeed real, and it is scary," said Tim Gross, a University of Florida wildlife endocrinologist on the team that discovered the feminized alligators. "We didn't want to believe it, in all honesty."

What didn't he want to believe?

His point was that this phenomenon is no quirk of evolution. It is probably a legacy of pollution.

And what's your point?

My point is that, when it comes to the animal kingdom, we have absolutely no difficulty making value judgments about what's "natural" or "unnatural." We're genuinely alarmed by "gender bending" among alligators and turtles in a Florida swamp, because it portends extinction for these species and for other species wherever certain pesticides have infiltrated waterways "across the continent and across the globe." But arbiters of human culture approve of "gender bending" on the campus at Columbia University--men having sex with other men, women having sex with other women, because it's "just an alternate lifestyle."