

**STRATEGIC DISCOURSE AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN IDAHO'S ANTI-GAY  
INITIATIVE**

**by**

**Joseph T. De Angelis  
Department of Sociology  
Boise State University**

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\*Direct all correspondence to Joseph T. De Angelis, Department of Sociology, Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725

## ABSTRACT

Drawing its analytic frame from the works of Michel Foucault and Kenneth Burke as explicated in Michael Blain's, "Power, war and melodrama in the discourses of political movements" (Theory and Society, 23(1994): 805-837), this paper presents a critical discourse analysis of 239 Idaho Statesman articles in an examination of the rhetorical strategies employed by both supporters and opponents of the 1993 Idaho Citizens Alliance anti-gay initiative.

The drive to put Idaho's anti-gay initiative on the ballot began in January of 1993, following Lon Mabon's formation of the Idaho Citizens Alliance (henceforth ICA); an offspring of Mabon's larger national organization, The American Citizens Alliance- the same umbrella organization which oversaw the 1992 anti-gay initiatives in Oregon and Colorado. The ICA argued that the homosexual community had a political agenda to gain special minority rights. To combat this agenda, the Idaho Citizens Alliance engaged and succeeded in formulating a ballot drive to collect 32,061 signatures and place their "Anti-Special Rights" legislation on the 1994 state ballot.

The initiative, which in the course of the campaign went through several revisions, ultimately stated that it would:

[1] Prohibit minority status from being granted to those who engage in homosexual behavior (67-8002); [2] Withhold legal recognition from same-sex marriages and domestic partnerships and declare them to be against public policy (67-8003); [3] Restrain any public school official from endorsing homosexual behavior as a healthy or acceptable behavior (67-8004); [4] Prohibit any state agency from using funds that would in any way express approval of homosexuality; [5] Provide that no state agency shall forbid generally the consideration of sexual behaviors as non-job factors (67-8006) [Proposed Title 67, Chapter 80, Idaho Code].

The response to the ICA's anti-gay initiative was a mixed one. While an overwhelming majority of Idaho's political leaders, candidates, and mainline churches opposed the measure, a significant portion of Idaho's evangelical and fundamentalist denominations voiced support for the initiative. Ultimately the ballot measure failed by a vote of 51% to 49% (with a margin of 3,000 votes).

If the causal roots of the initiative are examined, it would be easy to envision it as the product of purely local and contemporary social issues. Yet, in terms of this paper, we are

actively conceptualizing the initiative as part of a larger and much more extensive national conservative movement, of which the anti-gay battles are only a minor front. Additionally, we view this initiative as the manifestation and convergence of a larger cultural and socio-historical phenomena, which, because of space constraints, cannot be fully elaborated here (for a further discussion of this perspective see Duggins, 1994).

However, one critical perspective we have chosen to take when viewing the anti-gay initiative and the historical process of which it is partly a manifestation, is derived most prominently from Michel Foucault's (1978), The History of Sexuality, and the more recent theoretical position, Queer Theory (see Seidman, 1994; and Namaste, 1994). In brief, this position argues that our traditional understanding of the "natural truths" about sexuality (e.g., our belief that homosexuality and heterosexuality are mutually exclusive and polar categories) are social constructions which allow for power and control to be asserted over the minds and bodies of individuals, with the ultimate intent to transform individuals into utilizable resources (See Foucault, 1978 or a genealogical examination of the role of power in the formation of hegemonic regimes of knowledge surrounding sexualities "natural truths").

Within this paper, we adopt a critical value-driven position against such initiatives and argue that this initiative is only another front in a historical drive to establish hegemonic control over individuals through the construction of repressive systems of knowledge. The goal of this paper is to further critical understanding of the way in which discourse is used to justify and construct such issues as our recently failed anti-gay initiative. Through a mapping of supporters and opponents discourse, this research will help those involved in opposing future battles similar to Idaho's anti-gay initiative, formulate a more effective counter-discourse (for a full discussion of the aims of critical discourse analysis in demystifying and opposing oppression, see van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 1993).

## **CONCEPTUALIZATION**

Blain (1994), in his Power/Strategy explication of Foucault's Interpretive Analytic of Power Relations and Kenneth Burke's Victimage Ritual, argues that the use of discourse in social movements is "genealogically derived from the western practice of warfare" (1994: 806) where movement actors are generals and soldiers and the words they employ are the discursive weapons with which they engage the enemy (1994: 805). Blain argues that for any movement to be

effective, movement strategists need to do two things: First, "constitute a field of knowledge-- argue the truth of a problem, an injustice or a danger in a convincing way..."; and second, "constitute an ethics-- argue the solutions in an activating way, including the vilification of opponents as malevolent power subjects, and the heroicization of activists as moral agents and power subjects" (1994: 808). Within this process, each side of the movement must attempt to mobilize their forces against their adversary through the melodramatic characterization of themselves and their allies as victims and heroes struggling against a villainous and overwhelming enemy who is engaged in violation of community mores. To facilitate this, both sides must employ language in an attempt to make the opponent synonymous with culturally recognizable negative values, while associating themselves with positive values. By employing a critical discourse analysis methodology and Blain's conceptualization of movement discourse as "war pursued by other means", this paper will systematically inspect the way in which the opposing sides in the anti-gay initiative debate employed public speech to vilify and discredit their opponent, while attempting to construct the initiative in the minds of the voting electorate.

## **METHODS**

The corpus for this study was taken from 239 Idaho Statesman articles addressing the initiative which were selected through use of The Idaho Statesman Index (1993; 1994) from between the dates of Jan. 1, 1993 and Nov. 14, 1994. The Idaho Statesman was chosen because it is Idaho's highest circulating paper and was one of the main forums in which the initiative battle was discursively carried out. Once selected the articles were arranged in a chronological DOS text file and indexed by Wordcruncher (1983). This provided a complete alphabetical word frequency count in addition to simple statistics based on those frequencies. High frequency terms (freq. >65 or Z-score >.5) based on an overall mean (m=12.11) and standard deviation (SD=1.06) were selected, and after grammatical/structural terms were excluded (is, that, and...etc.) a list of unique action terms was compiled (terms which are capped in the analysis). This list was searched and examined in context which allowed for the inspection of the discursive arsenal of both sides, and the way in which they employed language to construct the initiative (the results are represented in Table of Values 1).

## **ANALYSIS**

In examining the discourse surrounding the initiative, it becomes quite clear that the

important terms can be analytically separated into four clusters- a political, a social, a religious, and a bio-medical cluster- based on the way in which they were deployed.

Table of Values 1						
Clusters of Action Terms Deployed by Supporters and Opponents						
Supporters		Opponents		Other	Self	Other
Self	Political		Gay Agenda			
Discriminate	Special Rights		Civil Rights		Quotas	
	Unconstitutional					
	Powerful	[Weak]	Unnecessary			
Left Wing	Conservative	Right-Wing	Scapegoating		Scapegoats	
Social		Gay Life-style	Bi-Partisan			
	Children					
	Promote				Schools	
		Divisive				
		Defenders	Censors			
		Values	Ignorant			
		Children		Fearful		
Religious			Immoral		Moral	Bigots
	Sinful	[sinless]	UnChristian	Christian		
	Sodomites			Theocrats		
	Evil	Good		Hateful	loving	
	Relativists	Absolutists	Intolerant			
		Loving	Radical		Moderate	
Bio-Medical			Abnormal		Normal	
	Homophobic					
	Unhealthy	[Healthy]	Egomaniac			
	Destructive	[Productive]	Disease			
	Perverse				Human	
	Pedophile				Normal	
	AIDS				Innate	
	Filthy					
	Freaks					
	Promiscuous					
	Behavior					

#### Political Cluster

Within the political cluster, there were arguments from both sides which emphasized the effect the initiative would and was having on the political order, the government, ..etc. In looking at the ICA, the most important strategy deployed within this cluster was their portrayal of the homosexual community's AGENDA to gain SPECIAL RIGHTS (quote 1).

(Quote 1) But Mabon said the effort is designed to head off gay rights measures. "We are being pro-active. They have a political agenda that wants to equate their behavior as a minority classification."..."we don't believe the practice of sodomy or lesbianism is a civil right." (Idaho Group Pushes For Anti-Gay Law: 11-14-93)

When they referred to SPECIAL RIGHTS they were implicitly referring to civil rights protections for homosexuals through the granting of minority status (which they argued would allow for GAY QUOTAS and AFFIRMATIVE ACTION), same-sex marriages (which would "devalue" real marriages), and the abolition of sodomy laws (which would allow the state to sanction IMMORAL and UNHEALTHY behavior). This strategy was the most consistent argument employed by the ICA supporters and constituted their portrayal of the "vehicle" through which the GAY THREAT was being carried out.

The response by the opponents of the ICA to this charge was unequivocal. They blocked the attack by arguing that they wanted only CIVIL RIGHTS, not SPECIAL RIGHTS, and counterattacked with the charge that the ICA wanted to DISCRIMINATE against one segment of the population- that of the homosexuals. Another prong in their counterattack emphasized pragmatic arguments against the initiative, contending that the initiative was WASTEFUL of tax dollars (in that it would cost millions to enforce and fend off constitutional challenges), was unnecessary (they argued that homosexuals did not have nor would be granted civil rights protection, therefore making the initiative unnecessary). In addition, they argued that the initiative was part of a larger, more sinister national RIGHT-WING movement (Quote 2).

(Quote 2) This is an organizing principle for a wider agenda," Smith said. "The conservative Christian movement is using homosexuals as an easy target for their political gain, feeding off a general ignorance about homosexuality." (National group plans to fight anti-gay proposal: 01-11-94) Within this larger movement, the political RIGHT was using homosexuals as SCAPEGOATS in an effort to further their own RADICAL political AGENDA.

#### Social Cluster

Within this cluster, both sides emphasized the effect that the initiative would have on the social fabric of American civilization; with the most prominent arguments from both sides describing the effect on the CHILDREN.

For the proponents of the initiative, the GAY LIFESTYLE was threatening CHILDREN, not only through their rendering of gays as PEDOPHILES, but also through their portrayal of homosexuality as a BEHAVIOR (bio-medical argument) that's transmittable. They argued that gays were PROMOTING their lifestyle in SCHOOLS and around CHILDREN, which raised the possibility of the young being converted (Quote 3) to the IMMORAL and UNHEALTHY GAY

LIFESTYLE (Quote 3).

(Quote 3) "What we are trying to do is literally prevent our kids and teenagers from being recruited into a life-style that is dangerous to the human body," he said. (Discrimination against gays exists: 06-08-94)

This argument tied in very strongly to the image of the GAY AGENDA by showing that should the GAY AGENDA be successful, a whole crop of kids would be lost. Therefore, they portrayed themselves as DEFENDERS and PROTECTORS of CHILDREN and SCHOOLS and allowed for an ethical argument to be forwarded which urged people to fight the GAY AGENDA and the threat it represented to CHILDREN and SCHOOLS. The opponents responded to this charge by arguing that, statistically, it was heterosexual males who posed a threat to CHILDREN, not homosexuals. They then counterattacked by arguing that the initiative supporters were IGNORANT and FEARFUL CENSORS who were a threat to the intellectual freedom and development of CHILDREN (Quote 4).

(Quote 4) "Anything that prohibits teachers from talking with students about serious social matters puts a chilling effect on the ability of teachers to provide students with the kind of information they need to make decisions for themselves." Sides differ on effects: 03-11-94)

Additionally, they contended that the initiative was DIVISIVE and a measure which divided the State population into two hostile camps.

#### Religious Cluster

In terms of the use of religious terms or characterizations, it was the opponents of the initiative who took the offensive, charging that the supporters of the initiative were HATEFUL and UNCHRISTIAN RADICALS who were INTOLERANT of other ways of life. One of the ways in which this imagery was deployed (quote 5) was by juxtaposing the anti-gay initiative with conspicuous religious atrocities of the past (e.g Holocaust) or other notorious hate groups (e.g., White supremacists located in Idaho's Hayden lake).

(Quote 5) "We reject hatred whenever and wherever it appears, and it appears in this proposition," Gov. Cecil Andrus told a lunchtime crowd on the Statehouse steps...Citing action the state took to undermine a white supremacist movement in the Panhandle, Andrus said, "Those voices of hatred and intolerance are at work here again." (400 rally to beat anti-gay

initiative: 09-09-94)

The counter-strategy and attack by the supporters of the initiative emphasized that the initiative was not HATEFUL at all, but was actually an act of LOVE (Quote 6) , designed to force the homosexuals out of their IMMORAL and DANGEROUS LIFESTYLE.

(Quote 6) "The initiative is exposing a dangerous lifestyle and a dangerous behavior. This is an act of compassion, not an act of discrimination or hatred." (Episcopal church announces stand against initiative: 11-30-93))

By employing this strategy, they made the argument that homosexuality was against God's tenets (justified through references to Leviticus, Paul's Letters, and Sodom and Gomorrah) and that they were just performing the task of LOVING CHRISTIANS.

#### Bio-Medical Cluster

It was within this sphere that the initiative supporters deployed their strongest ethical imperatives for opposing the GAY AGENDA and the GAY LIFE-STYLE. Within this cluster, it was found that the ICA supporters employed numerous medical and scientific assessments of gays and the gay "life-style," transforming them from humans into medical objects (which allowed them to be acted upon). One of the ways in which they did this was through making homosexuality synonymous with AIDS and DISEASE and by portraying gays as UNHEALTHY, SEX-OBSESSED, DESTRUCTIVE, UNNATURAL, PERVERSE, FILTHY (Quote 7). They argued strongly that homosexuality is a PATHOLOGY, taken on by CHOICE. This position makes numerous analogies between homosexuality and drug use, arguing that they are both DESTRUCTIVE to the body, and society, and thus should be subject to regulation by the state. Such regulation then, was the role which they argued the initiative was to play.

(Quote 7) It's not just a religious issue. It's a political issue. It's a social issue. It's a health issue," Fangman said. "Homosexuality destroys lives, families and the human body." (ICA members have a variety of goals: 06-06-93))

The opponents attempted to counter the image deployed by the supporters by portraying themselves as NORMAL HUMANS, who are no different than you or I. Within this counter-discourse, they portrayed themselves as BROTHERS, and SISTERS who are part of NORMAL FAMILIES whose sexuality is INNATE and not subject to CHOICE. This strategy constituted a vigorous effort to counter the image of homosexuals as objectifiable medical objects by

associating themselves with mundane everyday actions that all people, including initiative supporters, engage in (Quote 8).

(Quote 8) "The gay life-style is no different than heterosexual life. we get up, dress, we eat breakfast. We go to work and do our job just like anyone," ..."The difference is in who we love. Loving someone of the same sex is not obscene." (Idaho rallies attacks ICA: 4-26-93)

Of course, it has to be noted that there was no direct counter deployed to diffuse the charge that homosexuals are UNHEALTHY. Instead, they counter-attacked and pathologized those who supported the initiative, describing them as HOMOPHOBIC, PARANOID, and EGOMANIACS and likened the supporter's actions and beliefs to CANCER and DISEASE.

## **CONCLUSION**

What is left to be done now that a topical analysis of the rhetorical strategies has been performed, is to link this research with similar discourse analyses of other initiatives (such as Oregon's or Colorado's). Following this, effort needs to be put forth to formulate a more coherent and effective national counter-discourse which disarticulates supporters and helps to keep such measures from being voted in law. Enhanced critical understanding of similar fascist discursive movements will greatly facilitate the process of opposing such terrible and oppressive measures in the future.

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