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Respectability, Anti-Respectability, and Intersectionally Responsible Representation

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In the wake of the 2008 passage of California's Proposition 8, the ballot initiative that reinstated that state's ban on same-sex marriage (SSM), advocates and activists struggled to understand what had happened and to strategize for the fight that lay ahead. As part of these deliberations, a widely circulated report from the centrist advocacy group The Third Way argued that to convince "swing voters" to support SSM, they must be convinced "that gay couples want to marry for similar reasons that other couples do"—that is, "to build a life together based on love and commitment, staying together through thick and thin."[1] This approach formed the backbone for strategies in subsequent battles over SSM in states including Washington, Maine, Maryland, and Minnesota, seemingly to great avail: in 2012, voters in Washington, Maine, and Maryland approved initiatives allowing SSM. An anti-SSM ballot initiative was defeated in Minnesota, paving the way for subsequent passage of its "Freedom to Marry" law, making it among the first states to prevent a popular vote against SSM as well as to achieve SSM legislatively (Levine, Proctor, and Strolovitch 2015).

Around the same time that Third Way began this work, another set of activists formed a new online advocacy collective called Against Equality. Its stated goal was to challenge "the demand for inclusion in the institution of marriage, the US military, and the prison-industrial complex." The following excerpt from its webpage is emblematic of its approach:

> We hear rumors that…the children of gay married couples are healthier, wiser, kinder; that they can and do beat up the nasty illegitimate spawn of those who dare to remain unmarried…that the cats of married gay men regularly crap nuggets of gold… [M]ainstream gays and lesbians…insist that they are more moral and hence more deserving than sluts like us…We wish that the [SSM] crowd would simply cop to it: Their vision of marriage is the same as that of the Right, and far from creating FULL EQUALITY NOW!…gay marriage increases economic inequality by perpetuating a system which deems married beings more worthy of the basics like health care and economic rights.[2]

Third Way's representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people as committed, monogamous, and "just like" straight people well illustrates a dominant strain in what scholars have come to call "respectability politics"—a politics informed by a conviction that marginalized groups must demonstrate that they adhere to normative values before they will be accepted or granted rights by dominant groups (D'Emilio 1983; Higginbotham 1993; Minow 1985). Against Equality's representational strategy, in contrast, ridicules and resists what it regards as the respectability politics of SSM advocates by highlighting and challenging respectability's regressive implications, particularly for LGBTQ people who cannot or do not wish to conform to its imperatives.[3] And by referencing the excrement produced by the "cats of married gay men," they also turn respectability back on itself by associating it with scatology.

The contrast between these two approaches to representation for LGBTQ people illuminates an important tension when it comes to delineating "good representation" for marginalized groups (Dovi 2006): On the one hand, representational strategies that emphasize the respectability of some group members can facilitate political victories and policy advances. On the other hand, victories achieved by exploiting the normativity of respectable group members can participate in, perpetuate, and exacerbate forms of what Cathy Cohen (1999) has called the "secondary marginalization" of group members whose oppression is structured by the intersections of multiple forms of disadvantage—what scholars have come to call, following Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), intersectional marginalization.[4]

This tension is not new, but recent developments in the politics of race, gender, and sexuality have prompted both newly energized claims to respectability alongside new challenges to such claims among representatives of groups such as women, people of color, and LGBTQ people. These tensions have been further amplified by new technologies that provide outlets for views and actions that would have been more easily silenced in the past. In particular, advocacy collectives such as Against Equality, Black Lives Matter, and ShoutYourAbortion challenge the respectability imperative by taking as their points of representational departure the non-normative members of the groups they represent (Cohen 1997), and hashtags including #IfTheyGunnedMeDown and #notyourrespectablenegro challenge dominant media portrayals of people who have been killed by the police. Lester Spence

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(2015, 138–9) contends, for example, that Black Lives Matter activists have "argued that how [victims of racialized police violence] behaved" should have no bearing "on how they were treated by police." In constituting those they represent in ways that oppose dominant norms, these representatives construct their constituents in ways that both expose and resist the types of divisions between "worthy" and "unworthy" group members associated with a politics of respectability.

The time is consequently ripe for contemplating the place of respectability in what we call "intersectionally responsible representation," a form of what Suzanne Dovi (2006) calls "good representation" for marginalized groups that builds on the "affirmative advocacy" framework articulated by Dara Strolovitch (2007) in her book by that name. Affirmative advocacy contends that "good" representation for disadvantaged groups "requires proactive efforts to overcome the entrenched but often subtle biases that persist against marginalized groups in American politics" (Strolovitch 2007, 29; see also Severs and de Jong in this issue). The friendly amendment we offer here adds that a "good intersectional representative" also must reckon with the ambivalent nature of respectability politics, in which defiant demands for respect, rights, and resources can risk redrawing rather than erasing the boundaries of intersectional and secondary marginalization. Intersectionally responsible representatives also must recognize that the racialized, gendered, and sexualized realities that have produced respectability continue to structure the uneven possibilities for and consequences of dissent and rebellion available to differently situated members of marginalized groups. They must recognize as well that, in part as a consequence, the costs of both adhering to and flouting the imperatives of respectability are borne disproportionately by those whose marginalization is structured by the intersections of multiple forms of disadvantage (Cohen 1997; Griffin 2000, 28).

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We begin below with a brief overview of the concept of "respectability politics." We then use examples of representation for LGBTQ people to illustrate that even those efforts to address marginalization that is constituted by multiple forms of disadvantage can reinforce and contribute to the intransigence of intersectional marginalization if it is not attentive to issues of respectability. More specifically, rather than signaling the dissolution of intersectional marginalization, contemplating the over-time evolution of non-LGBTQ organizations' involvement in battles over issues such as SSM and "Don't Ask Don't Tell" (DADT, which had prohibited gay men and lesbians from serving openly in the military) highlights the extent to which representational strategies that adhere to the respectability imperative can contribute to the dynamism, shifting boundaries, and stubborn effects of intersectional marginalization rather than to its dissolution.

RESPECTABILITY POLITICS

The politics of respectability have long been a staple of, as well as controversial among, representatives and movements of marginalized groups. As Deborah Gould (2009, 89) writes, "[a] politics of respectability is almost always deeply ambivalent: concerned above all with social acceptance, it entails efforts of some members of a marginalized group both to disprove dominant stereotypes about the group and to regulate and 'improve' the behavior of its members in line with socially approved norms." By constituting the group as unthreatening and normatively acceptable, it becomes deserving of rights, equality, and fair treatment. In her foundational book about gender and the Black Baptist Church, for example, historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993, 14–15) showed how Black Baptist women endeavored "to win the black lower class's psychological allegiance to temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual morals." The consequent internal policing and attributions of "institutional racism to the 'negative' public behavior of their people" suggested that it was a rejection of "'improper' decorum"—rather than an end to structural racism—"that would eradicate the pervasive racial barriers that surrounded black Americans."

The version of respectability often labeled "homonormativity" has been likewise revealing of the political traps and paradoxes navigated by LGBTQ activists. John D'Emilio (1983), for example, describes a "retreat to respectability" on the part of early homophile organizations such as the Mattachine Society. Founded in 1951 by radicals (many of whom had been members of communist organizations), Mattachine's quest to broaden its ranks and achieve social acceptance led it to abandon its defining commitments to the "affirmation of a distinctive gay identity," to "collective, militant action," and to "mobilizing a gay constituency." As Mattachine shifted its focus to "assisting the work of professionals," it urged "homosexuals (*sic*)…[to] accommodate to life in and the social norms of a homophobic society" and to "adjust to a 'pattern of behavior that is acceptable to society…and compatible with [the] recognized institutions…of home, church and state'" (Meeker 2001, 79).

Whereas the constraining effects of such an approach are clear, the complicated contexts that motivate respectability politics can make them sensible, all but irresistible,

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if not inevitable. D'Emilio (1983, 91), for example, notes that Mattachine's capitulation to respectability cannot be understood without understanding the intensity of the anti-communism, attacks on "sexual perverts," and increasing police harassment of the 1950s. Cohen (1999) argues similarly that whereas a commitment to respectability was in part responsible for the deadly silence among black political elites in the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the attendant policing of and distancing between "those deemed 'respectable'…and those deemed 'deviant'" was also understandable in the face of whites' racism. It is important, she concludes, "that we not trivialize or demean this vehicle," which was not only "a mechanism to leverage dominant power but also a means to demonstrate the basic humanity and equality of Black Americans" (Cohen 2004, 31). This ambivalence is particularly salient to Higginbotham (2015), who argues that for all of its problems, the politics of respectability are also inherently defiant, asserting as they do to "the outside world, 'You don't respect me, but I'm worthy of respect. You don't treat me like an equal person, but I know that I am an equal person, and because I am an equal person…I'm going to demand equality. I'm not going to let you treat me like a second class citizen.'"

REPRESENTING RESPECTABILITY

The complicated and ambivalent implications of respectability for contemporary politics are well illustrated by the involvement of organizations that do not focus primarily on LGBTQ issues in the campaigns for marriage equality and the repeal of DADT. Scholars and activists have critiqued the prioritization of these issues and their use as barometers of progress, arguing that they are more likely to benefit relatively privileged LGBTQ people. These critiques often focus on the ways in which campaigns by LGBTQ-specific organizations constitute LGBTQ people in intersectionally-troubling ways (Cohen 1997; Duggan 2005; Hindman forthcoming; Murib 2015; Spade 2011; Vaid 1995). Once mainly the purview of LGBTQ organizations and their antigay adversaries, however, these issues were taken up by a relatively broad array of progressive organizations. In a marked departure from the near exclusion of LGBTQ-focused advocacy reported in Strolovitch's (2007) study of the 1990s, for example, she found that in the 2000s, public-sector unions such as the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) placed themselves at the center of the battle to repeal DADT (Strolovitch 2012). Third Way, for its part, was a central player in working to promote the legalization of SSM in the 2000s.

The engagement of such organizations with LGBTQ issues is, by some measures, a sign of progress for intersectionally-responsible representation. But bringing considerations about respectability to bear on the substance and meaning of this engagement also complicates the simple application of intersectionality as a metric for interrogating and redressing simultaneous forms of marginalization. A 2009 AFSCME advertisement advocating the repeal of DADT provides an illustrative example (https://www.afscme.org/now/archive/blog/ad-calls-for-end-to-dont-ask-dont-tell). The advertisement features an image of a white and prototypically masculine soldier, accompanied by text explaining that under DADT, "More than 13,000 Americans, who volunteered to serve and defend our country, have been discharged…this policy undermines our national security…It requires the discharge of trained, essential members of military units…Our military will be stronger when we stop a policy that denies talented men and women the opportunity to serve our country with honesty…."

AFSCME's ad is part of a long tradition of claiming (and winning) rights for marginalized groups based on military service and assertions of patriotism (Klinkner and Smith 1999; Novkov 2008; Parker 2009; Skocpol 1992). And it is significant that this non-LGBTQ-specific organization "went intersectional" by including gay men—a disadvantaged subgroup of its constituency—as part-and-parcel of the public-sector workers who are their constituents. It is equally significant, however, that it did so through constructions of the good, respectable, traditionally masculine, patriotic, and "homonationalist" gay citizen (Puar 2007)—a strategy that promotes the inclusion of such "good gays" while also suggesting that non-normative LGBTQ people may have more tenuous claims to citizenship.

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Same-sex marriage illustrates a similar phenomenon. After a decade of repeated and escalating attacks on LGBTQ issues and people, advocates within and outside of the LGBTQ advocacy world decided to co-opt rather than resist the discourses of traditional morals and family values. As suggested by the Third Way report cited previously, rather than insisting that LGBTQ people had a right to be treated fairly *despite* being "different," they began to assert that their normalcy and attendant respectability entitled them to equal treatment (Levine, Proctor, and Strolovitch 2015). Like the repeal of DADT, marriage equality confers rights and benefits that, as Gayatri Spivak (1999) has put it, "we cannot not want." And like the image of a masculine and tough solider in AFSCME's advertisement, navigation of the difference dilemma through representations of LGBTQ people as faithful, committed, and

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loving partners-for-life is motivated in part by understandable desires to counter injurious stereotypes and their effects (Minow 1985).

But as scholars who emphasize the constitutive role of representation remind us, claims-making processes and interest articulation construct the groups that political actors claim to represent in particular ways (Bacchi 1999; Hindman forthcoming; Murib 2015; Squires 2008). Strolovitch (2007) showed that among the consequences of constitutive processes of representation is that they often "organize out" (Schattschneider 1960) issues and identities associated with intersectionally constituted marginalization. In the particular cases of SSM and DADT, these representational strategies entail distancing worthy and respectable LGBTQ people from dominant notions and stereotypes of them as, for example, weak, promiscuous, and deviant. In so doing, they participate in what Tom Boellstorff (2007, 227–8) labels the "civilizing mission" of projects such as SSM, celebrating it as a means to normalize queer sexuality (see also Duggan 2005). The resulting construction of who LGBTQ people "are" constitutes them in narrow, gender-normative, and exclusionary ways, underscoring and reinforcing other lines of exclusion and secondary marginalization even as they "affirmatively advocate" on behalf of marginalized subgroups of their broader constituencies. In contrast, by rejecting the normative and respectable married two-parent household as the ideal family, Against Equality's representational strategy follows Cohen's (1997) plea that queer activists ally themselves with "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" and constitutes LGBTQ people as, *inter alia*, unmarried pacifists who question the authority of the government, get arrested, and whose fates are linked to those of single parents and their children.

CONCLUSION: AN ANTI-RESPECTABILITY REVOLUTION?

In flouting respectability's strictures, groups like Against Equality join a long and storied tradition of "anti-respectability" advocates, from the Gay Liberationists and Black Panthers who rejected the nonthreatening and accommodationist strategies in the 1960s; to the Lavender Menace's taunting of Betty Friedan's (and the National Organization for Women's) lesbophobia in the 1970s; to the in-your-face strategies of ACT-UP, Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers in the 1980s and 1990s. By pushing back against respectability's imperatives, advocates such as these enact a version of what Cohen (2004, 38) terms "deviance as resistance," a politics that centers—rather than marginalizing or pathologizing—those deemed "deviant." In so doing, anti-respectability advocates disrupt power differentials (Severs and de Jong 2018) by exposing, recognizing, and marking respectability *as* a politics, thereby practicing an important element of intersectionally responsible "good" representation. ■

NOTES

1. Available at www.thirdway.org/report/commitment-the-answer-to-the-middles-questions-on-marriage-for-gay-couples-2.
2. Available at againstequality.org/about/marriage.
3. We define "representatives" to include entities such as interest groups, social movement organizations, and online advocacy collectives (Strolovitch 2007).
4. Space restrictions prohibit discussion of other significant "intersectional tensions" related to "good representation" for marginalized groups. For example, there may be circumstances under which the most "respectable" might suffer from intersectional forms of disadvantage. Respectability politics might actually strengthen representation for intersectionally-marginalized groups while weakening that afforded those whose intersectional positioning combines privilege and subordination. Concerns about respectability also dovetail with what Martha Minow (1985, 157) has called the "difference dilemma," in which remedies for unequal treatment for marginalized groups "risk reinforcing the stigma associated with assigned difference by either ignoring it or focusing on it." However, whereas claims about being "like" straight people might be thought of as ignoring the ways in which LGBTQ people are "different" than heterosexuals, the issue with respectability is less that it ignores/focuses on these differences or that focusing on differences perpetuates stigma, and more that it differentiates among more/less worthy group members based on whether they do/do not conform to dominant norms.

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