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Review of *Progay/Antigay: The Rhetorical War Over Sexuality* by Ralph R. Smith and Russell R. Windes

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RALPH R. SMITH AND RUSSELL R. WINDES, *Progay/Antigay: The Rhetorical War Over Sexuality*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. vii–xxiv+202 pp. \$79.95, ISBN 0–7619–1646–6 (hbk). \$35.95, ISBN 0–7619–1647–4 (pbk)

When I was asked to review *Progay/Antigay*, I actually felt both trepidation and excitement for two reasons. First, I have a personal interest in the subject matter because I am a gay man who considers himself moderately active in both politics and the gay community. Second, I live in Nebraska, a state whose voters recently banned legal recognition of same-sex relationships, whether they be called ‘marriage’ or ‘domestic partnership’ or ‘civil union.’ For these reasons, I felt that the text could potentially elucidate the bitter struggle that we in the Midwest had just been through.

Smith and Windes admit in their introduction that they are progay advocates. They further claim to present a balanced investigation of the issues. They succeed admirably. This book is not a treatise on which political stance we should adopt; instead, it is an honest, hard-hitting look at the development of the progay/antigay war over sexuality in the United States.

The book begins with what Smith and Windes call ‘issue culture’ – the notion that discrete political bodies congeal around issues that they wish to influence in some way. The issue here Smith and Windes call variant sexuality, and Chapter 1 examines the emergence of this variant sexuality issue culture in the US. In fact, Smith and Windes remark on the growing amount of discourse about the arguments: ‘To paraphrase a cliché, the love which dared not defend its name has evolved through confrontation into an identity about which our society is irrepressibly loquacious’ (p. 5). Smith and Windes articulate the thesis of their text: the progay/antigay sexuality war is ongoing and cyclic – each group depends, in part, on the discourse produced by the other group in order to establish and solidify their own argument, attack, evidence and defense.

Subsequent chapters extend the concepts raised in the Introduction and Chapter 1. Chapter 2 examines three perspectives on communication: (i) language, (ii) collective action and (iii) processes of interactional adjustment within an issue culture (p. 35). Smith and Windes explore rhetorical appeals in Chapter 3; ultimately, they claim that a limited number of appeals recurs in different combinations in most of the struggles over issues. One important concept in the book is the notion of ‘interpretive packages’; knowledge and appeals and truth statements get bundled together and presented to the public in a variety of ways which necessarily attempt to persuade audiences to adopt the ‘correct’ stance, i.e. either antigay or progay. This chapter is an excellent synthesis of various discourses in both camps.

Chapter 4 gets at the heart of Smith and Windes’ thesis – it discusses the ‘influence of adversarial symbolic action on identity and strategy within interpretive packages’ (p. 56). In addition to treating disagreement within both the progay and antigay camps, Smith and Windes provide a case study of same-sex marriages, which delves into the way in which interpretive packages play off each other. In the final chapter of the book, Smith and Windes soundly chastise both groups. In particular, they claim that one of the biggest problems in the war over sexuality is that both progay and antigay advocates have stopped listening to each other. Even though each camp co-opts and manipulates the other’s discursive production for their own use, they do so not for true communication and resolution of the disagreement but for singular victory and annihilation of the opposition.

I highly recommend this book for all scholars in rhetoric and discourse studies who have interests in social theory and change. The war over sexuality has taken a heavy toll on 20th and 21st century America. Smith and Windes go a long way in helping us to understand the nature of the illness, and they help point us toward a cure.

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