Lawrence & The Road from Liberation to Equality

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To think about the future of lesbian and gay rights in the wake of *Lawrence v. Texas*,1 we inevitably need to look to the past. After all, the movement that first sparked efforts to challenge statutes like the Texas “Homosexual Conduct” law was not a rights movement at all.2 Instead, when lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals began organizing in 1969, their rallying cry was for liberation.3 To gauge what *Lawrence* means, then, we need to think in terms of both liberation, as the movement’s early aim, and legal equality, which is the dominant demand of today’s activists and advocates.4

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To carry out this contextualized inquiry, let us consider first how Lawrence fits in with some of the early goals of the gay movement and then consider why anti-gay discrimination has not crumbled in the wake of the Court’s passionate pronouncement of the core humanity of lesbians and gay men.

As just mentioned, the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s did not, generally speaking, prioritize the right to marry or to serve in the military. Instead, the movement’s chief claim was for sexual and social freedom: freedom from state laws criminalizing the sexual intimacy of lesbians and gay men and freedom from harassment by law enforcement officers who took advantage of sodomy laws to stalk and extort patrons at gay bars, to shut down lesbian dances, and to otherwise make the lives of lesbians and gay men miserable. To put the point more positively, the demand was for freedom to live as open lesbians and gay men without the threat (and reality) of state interference.
Interestingly though, if we look back to laws governing sexuality in the 1970s when this movement took force, it turns out that nearly every state had numerous statutes prohibiting all sorts of sexual relationships between consenting adults. There were sodomy laws that banned oral and anal sex but did not, for the most part, single out same-sex couples for their penalties. There were (and still are) fornication laws forbidding sexual relationships between unmarried adults. Adultery laws limited the sexual freedom of married adults. And, before *Eisenstadt v. Baird* was decided in 1972, states were free to impose criminal punishment for the provision of birth control to unmarried individuals. As a matter of positive law, with most consensual, private, non-commercial sexual relationships criminalized, it is fair to say that the sexual freedom of all adults, especially outside of marriage, was on roughly the same footing.

The problem, as we know, and as *Lawrence* acknowledged, was not so much the enforcement of positive law as the invocation of those laws outside the criminal prosecution context. Although the story of sodomy laws' secondary effects is familiar to anyone who has studied gay rights jurisprudence, I want to offer three classic examples from the worlds of family law, employment discrimination, and politics to provide a platform for gaining perspective on *Lawrence*’s aftermath.

First, consider the many custody and visitation cases in which a parent’s identity as lesbian or gay or a parent’s sexual relationship with a same-sex partner provided grounds for a court to limit parental contact with a child. The Virginia Supreme Court’s determination in *Bottoms v. Bottoms* was perhaps the most notorious of these because the court took the extreme step of shifting custody from a lesbian

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7. *See infra* text accompanying notes 8–10.
12. *Id*.
parent to the child’s grandmother. Among the court’s reasons for doing so was the mother’s admission that she had violated Virginia’s sodomy law.

In the employment context, law student Robin Shahar lost her offer of employment with the Georgia Attorney General’s office when Michael Bowers, then the Attorney General, learned that Shahar planned to marry a woman in a religious ceremony. He justified his decision on the grounds that he could not impugn the credibility of his office, which enforced Georgia’s sodomy laws, by having a presumed lawbreaker as an assistant attorney general, even though the Georgia law applied equally to his gay and non-gay employees.

And, in the political context, as jurisdictions throughout the country debated adoption of anti-discrimination laws that would cover sexual-orientation, the existence of a state sodomy prohibition became a familiar argument of the opposition. How can a community possibly prohibit anti-gay discrimination, opponents of the sexual orientation protection would ask, when the state is permitted to impose criminal penalties on gay people’s sexual conduct?

In other words, even when the law criminalized specific acts between same-sex partners (or all adults), the problem for gay people was not so much that the sex acts themselves were punished as that gay people were uniquely identified as lawbreakers, albeit

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17. See id. at 108. It bears noting that the sodomy law referenced in the court’s opinion applied to all Virginians without regard to sexual orientation. VA. CODE ANN. § 18.2-361(A) (Michie 1996). Other courts relied on laws singling out same-sex couples for punishment as grounds for restricting custody or visitation of a lesbian or gay parent. See, e.g., Thigpen, 730 S.W.2d at 512. For additional discussion of custody litigation involving lesbian and gay parents, see, for example, Patricia M. Logue, The Rights of Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children, 18 J. AM. ACAD. MATRIM. LAW. 95 (2002) and Julie Shapiro, Custody and Conduct: How the Law Fails Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children, 71 IND. L.J. 623 (1996).
19. Id. at 1101. Later, Michael Bowers admitted to having violated the State’s adultery ban while serving as Attorney General. James Vicini, US Supreme Court Denies Appeal by Lesbian Lawyer, AAP NEWSFEED, Jan. 13, 1998. The sodomy law that allegedly necessitated Robin Shahar’s loss of employment with the Georgia Attorney General’s office was later invalidated in Powell v. State, 510 S.E.2d 18, 26 (Ga. 1998) (striking down Georgia’s sodomy law in a case involving sexual contact between a man and a woman).
20. GA. CODE ANN. § 16-6-2(a) (1984) (“A person commits the offense of sodomy when he performs or submits to any sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another.”).
22. See id. at 388.
unconvicted, and then made to suffer in other ways.\(^2\)

When *Lawrence* reversed *Bowers*\(^4\) and held that the state could not outlaw same-sex sexual relations, gay people's free exercise of sexuality could no longer be limited on account of the criminal law. Therefore one might think, with lawbreaker status removed, the state would be left with no reason to continue to treat lesbians and gay men differently from non-gay people in the secondary contexts where such great concern about lawbreaking had been expressed. In other words, if the only barrier to full equality was that gay people's sexual intimacy could be criminalized, we would expect to see all other sexual orientation-based barriers falling away.

However, while we are barely past the first anniversary of *Lawrence*, we have not seen a single anti-gay barrier fall away without a fight. Instead, we see legislators and presidential candidates, and even, to a limited degree, President George W. Bush, conceding the unfairness of non-recognition of gay and lesbian relationships at the same time as they fight tooth and nail against equalizing marriage itself.\(^2\) We see anxious efforts of elected officials in Massachusetts and elsewhere to offer civil union status to same-sex couples—which is understood, Vermont-style, as the functional equivalent of marriage within a state\(^2\)—yet pulling out all stops to bar access to marriage.\(^2\)

Some courts have likewise demonstrated similar determination to sustain gay people's inequality on the heels of *Lawrence*'s removal of the stigma of criminality. Two examples will be explored briefly here. In one of these cases, *Lofton v. Secretary of the Department of Children and Family Services*,\(^8\) the Eleventh Circuit sustained a ban on adoption by gay people for reasons entirely unrelated to sexual

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23. See id. at 366.
26. "Parties to a civil union shall have all the same benefits, protections and responsibilities under law, whether they derive from statute, administrative or court rule, policy, common law or any other source of civil law, as are granted to spouses in a marriage." VT. STAT. ANN. tit. 15, § 1204(a) (2002).
27. See Dana Mulhauser, *Dispatch from the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention, The Tragic Lives of State Legislators* (Feb. 13, 2004), at http://slate.msn.com/id/2095452/ (reporting that a majority of Massachusetts legislators desired to ban marriage of same-sex partners but were divided on whether to create civil unions) (last visited Oct. 27, 2004).
freedom. Instead, the court held, the state can legitimately want children to grow up in a home where parents have the possibility of being legally married and can give children advice about heterosexual relationships. Heterosexual parents, in other words, are better role models for children who are wards of the state.

Something similar happened in State v. Limon. There, the Kansas Court of Appeals upheld on remand a seventeen-year criminal sodomy sentence of an eighteen-year-old man for having consensual oral sex with a fourteen-year-old. If the fourteen-year-old had been a young woman rather than a young man, the sentence imposed would have been less than seventeen months. The lead justification accepted by the court in Limon was that Kansas could legitimately discourage voluntary sexual behavior between young adults and minors that deviates from traditional sexual mores.

In other words, the resounding message from Lofton and Limon is this: Even if the state can no longer criminalize gay people's sexual relationships, we still do not want children to think that it is perfectly acceptable to be gay. The message underlying the willingness of elected officials to offer some recognition to gay and lesbian couples but not traditional recognition in the form of marriage is similar—it is not as good to be gay as it is to be heterosexual.

At a deeper level, it seems, the concern expressed is not just that children will become more tolerant and accepting of gay people they encounter—after all, even the President in his effort to bar gay people from marrying is talking about tolerance and respect. Why would the state be concerned about tolerance if tolerance had no effect on people's lives, other than to facilitate cooperation among neighbors and co-workers? Tolerance and even respect would seem, in that vein, to be well within any government's interests.

Instead, I believe the fear is that all of this tolerance may begin to make it more enticing to be gay. In other words, underlying the legislative debates and the cases is the concern that more young people may absorb the message that it is perfectly acceptable to be

29. Id. at 818, 827 (concluding that law prohibiting lesbians and gay men from adopting is rationally related to the state interest of providing stability for adoptive children).
30. Id. at 822.
32. Id. at 232.
33. Id. at 243 (Pierron, J., dissenting).
34. Id. at 236–37.
gay and that this message, alone, will wind up influencing the sexual orientation—or at least the sexual practices—of our nation's youth. So in Congress, in state legislatures, the thought is that even if the government cannot use criminal law, it is entitled to send the message of gay people's inferiority other ways, so that children do not think it is as good to be gay as it is to be straight.

But is that correct? Can the state freely disapprove of being gay if it is not free to disapprove of same-sex sexual intimacy?

Although a full exploration of this question is beyond the scope of these remarks, I want to suggest that constitutional jurisprudence will not supply a comprehensive answer. Instead, the most fruitful source for understanding the persistence of anti-gay discrimination in the wake of Lawrence lies at the intersection of law, politics, and culture where rational reasoning is not necessarily the dominant force.

My suggestion is that we think about the current debates and the conflict between Lofton and Limon's majority opinions and Limon's dissenting opinion as reflecting a sort of national adolescence with respect to the status of gay people. On the one hand, we are witnessing a steady march toward what I would call maturity—that is, in my view, a world in which an individual's sexual orientation has no legal relevance to rights or responsibilities and where, accordingly, legal distinctions based on sexual orientation cannot stand. On the other, we are experiencing strong resistance to this development. Those who defend the continuing relevance of gay identity to parenting and marriage effect the equivalent of the adolescent's slammed door through their seemingly willful refusal to engage with rational counterarguments to their position.

From this vantage point, I want to return to the question of sexual freedom where this discussion began. After all, today—as far as
the positive law is concerned—many of the sexual freedom goals of
the gay liberation movement of the early 1970s have been won.43 Gay
people can no longer be thrown in jail for sexual intimacy.44 Police
officers cannot use sodomy laws to shut down gay bars and lesbian
dances.45

Indeed, in most respects, sexual freedom for consenting adults is
at the highest watermark to date. We can read—in books, magazines,
and on the Internet—about every imaginable sexual act. We can see
all sorts of sexual activity on network television at any hour of the
day, let alone the intense and explicit sexual activity on cable.
Simulation of sexual acts—even in the middle of the Super Bowl—is
considered perfectly fine as a legal matter so long as the barest bit of
clothing remains.46

Against this background of sexual freedom in a post-Lawrence
world, it appears that the governments, which can no longer justify
restricting gay people based on criminal status, are calling on concerns
about children's sexual identity to do the work that sodomy laws once
did. And over the next several years, as the case law continues to
develop, we will see whether Lawrence has truly destabilized the
discriminatory regime of Bowers or whether fear about child
development will be permitted to replace Bowers as an all-purpose
justification to support restrictions on gay people's full equality.

Ultimately, I believe this country will outgrow its adolescent
rebellion over the acceptability of gay people. The question for us, at
this moment, is whether and how we will be able to limit the damage it
does along the way.

43. See, e.g., Lawrence v. Texas, 539 U.S. 558, 578 (2003). Cf. CRUIKSHANK, supra
note 2 (reviewing and analyzing goals of the gay and lesbian liberation movement).
44. Id.
45. See cases cited supra note 6.