

# LGBT FAMILIES, YOUTH, AND SEXUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

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Approaches to LGBT rights and LGBT families in the United States and in Europe differ greatly. Whereas issues of sexual orientation and gender expression in general are often the focus of acrimonious public debates in the United States, LGBT rights enjoy some degree of protection in many European countries and they are guaranteed in Article 21 of the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights. On the other hand, the US federal system affords LGBT families in certain states or localities better recognition than in most EU countries. The United States may thus serve as a useful vantage point for comparisons with Europe. In particular, do the differences between the experiences of LGBT families on either side of the Atlantic cast the American model as an example for Europeans to follow, a cautionary tale, or a foil which enhances European achievements? We suggest that the answer is mitigated, insofar as differences owe to a complex mixture of political tradition, institutional framework, and social state of affairs. We propose to examine the matter by exploring the interplay between issues of LGBT families and youth sexuality in the United States.

The recognition of LGBT families in the United States has been evolving rapidly since the 1990s. The “gay marriage” theme in particular has become a prominent topic in both national and state politics. Same-sex marriage, however, is not all there is to LGBT families in the United States, as LGBT people have in fact invented a wide variety of family configurations, which – though often informally – have reshuffled definitions of the American family. As a result the LGBT community can less and less be assumed to solely consist of unattached adult individuals, or couples without offspring. The issue of *generations* has thus become extremely important for the American LGBT movement, insofar as it concerns not simply procreation and adoption, but the whole set of processes whereby culture and values are transmitted from one generation to the following, so that each LGBT generation can symbolically outlive itself (Marche 2003, 99–100; Whisman 1996, 123–124). Consequently the po-

litical questions raised by LGBT families in the United States potentially hold interesting lessons for the politics of LGBT families in Europe.

Our claim is that the development of alternative families has made youth sexuality a vital issue for the American LGBT movement, and that it is instructive to examine how this question is dealt with in a context where, since the 1990s in particular, sex panics – i.e. irrational public fears growing out of isolated cases of sexual abuse or misdemeanour – have increasingly tended to cast youth as an asexual sanctuary. We suggest that there is a paradox in that, on the one hand, the overall political context puts a premium on desexualising LGBT politics, while, on the other hand, LGBT families challenge the movement to find appropriate ways of dealing with the issue of youth and sexuality. We explore this question through the lens of social-movement sociology by considering the way movement organisations do, or fail to, reconcile their discussions of families, and of youth and sexuality.

We begin by showing that, given the current state of the political debate in the United States, and whether LGBT advocates like it or not, the issue of youth sexuality is of the foremost importance in the LGBT families debate. We then go on to argue that the non-youth movement has got increasingly desexualised, whereas the main issues of significance for LGBT youth are more straightforwardly related to sexuality. However, even as the questions of LGBT families and youths do expose the LGBT movement to attacks that primarily stigmatise homosexuality as a sexual conduct and a choice, the movement tends to react by claiming that sexual orientation is primarily an identity and it is *not* a choice. As a result, the LGBT movement's current approach to youth issues is a sign of its growing essentialism, whereas this movement used to deal with such questions in ways that proposed alternative social definitions of gender and sexuality. The challenge for the LGBT movement is therefore to find effective ways to confront the strong counter-movement mounted by religious right-wing organisations<sup>31</sup> in reaction to the emergence of alternative LGBT families. We end by showing that this very aggressive counter-movement questions the LGBT movement's relation to youth sexuality, but at the same time puts it in a position to propose innovative approaches to youth and sexuality. As a consequence, the LGBT movement is ultimately challenged to approach youth sexuality as a matter of rights and empowerment.

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<sup>31</sup> Among these organizations are for example Focus on the Family, the American Family Association, or Concerned Women for America.

**LGBT FAMILIES AND THE LGBT MOVEMENT**

Same-sex marriage has undeniably become the most visible aspect of the politics of LGBT families in the US, in part because it has been used as a high-profile issue in national and state politics. Access to marriage is indeed important to LGBT families because official recognition facilitates making families through adoption or artificial insemination, for example. But the legal situation of same-sex marriage is constantly evolving. A recent high-profile issue results from Proposition 8 in California, where in 2008 voters approved a constitutional amendment restricting marriage to the union of one man and one woman – after the state's Supreme Court in May 2008 had mandated that the right to marry be extended to same-sex couples. Although the amendment's constitutionality was upheld by California's Supreme Court in May 2009, it was since struck down by a federal court in August 2010 and will in all likelihood be eventually reviewed by the United States Supreme Court (Schwartz 2009; Dolan 2010).<sup>32</sup> Six other states – Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York and Vermont<sup>33</sup> – and the federal capital Washington, DC, do allow same-sex marriage but most states' statutes and/or constitutions ban same-sex marriage,<sup>34</sup> and eighteen states also ban domestic partnership or civil unions.<sup>35</sup>

On the contrary, even before they legalised same-sex marriage, New York and the District of Columbia – i.e. the federal capital, Washington – did recognise those legally entered into in other states. Finally, five states allow civil unions, whether in addition to marriage – e.g. Vermont –, instead of marriage – e.g. New Jersey –, or in spite of a marriage ban – e.g. California.<sup>36</sup> As a result the map of the recognition and prohibition of same-sex marriage or unions is both unstable and very complex.<sup>37</sup> But

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<sup>32</sup> Proposition 8 may also ultimately be challenged with a ballot measure to reverse it.

<sup>33</sup> Maine did legislate to allow same-sex marriage in 2009, but the law was repealed through a ballot measure in the polls in November 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Twenty one state constitutions prohibit same-sex marriage, and twelve states have a statutory ban.

<sup>35</sup> These are: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Idaho, Louisiana, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Wisconsin.

<sup>36</sup> These five states are: Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, New Jersey and Rhode Island.

<sup>37</sup> The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) posts regularly updated maps of the recognition of same-sex couples in the United States at <[http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/marriage\\_and\\_partnership\\_recognition](http://www.thetaskforce.org/issues/marriage_and_partnership_recognition)> (9 August 2011).

what is striking is that the issue has become so prominent as to all but subsume the political debate on LGBT families in the United States: indeed, hardly any other LGBT rights issue enjoys equivalent political visibility.<sup>38</sup>

But in fact, LGBT people have invented a wide variety of family configurations, and because of the same-sex marriage debate these various family types have lost visibility. There are, for example, couples who do not particularly want to get married, but demand access to adoption. Thirteen states and the District of Columbia authorise joint adoption by same-sex parents, and nine states, plus again the District of Columbia, authorise second-parent adoption by same-sex partners.<sup>39</sup> In addition, local – i.e. city or county – governments in several states also allow adoption. So the United States is relatively tolerant in this respect, as only one state, Florida, bars all homosexual people – whether as individuals or couples – from adopting, and a mere three other states, Utah, Mississippi and Arkansas, forbid adoption by unmarried or same-sex couples.<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere same-sex couples and LGBT persons can take advantage of legal loopholes to seek an authorisation to adopt.

It is noteworthy though that adoption by same-sex couples or by a biological parent's same-sex partner is never recognised as a fully-fledged right, but granted as a matter of derogation. It is also remarkable that access to adoption is surprisingly easier than marriage – the reverse of Europe – as a result of the country's federalism: marriage is a state-wide competence, whereas adoption can be addressed more locally; as a result same-sex marriage has much more political visibility than adoption, because its presence in state politics has a repercussion in, and is an

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<sup>38</sup> One such high-profile LGBT rights issue is the integration of openly homosexual soldiers in the US army, but its visibility has been more sporadic – essentially linked to attempted integration by individual presidents: Bill Clinton unsuccessfully in 1993 and Barack Obama successfully in 2010 – and, although highly symbolical, it is of direct concern to much fewer people than same-sex marriage.

<sup>39</sup> The former are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, Washington and the District of Columbia; the latter are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont and the District of Columbia; eight states and the District of Columbia allow both.

<sup>40</sup> The Arkansas law was struck down by a state court in 2010, but the decision is not final until it has been affirmed or reversed by the state's Supreme Court. Additionally, in Michigan state jurisprudence effectively bars unmarried individuals and same-sex couples married in other states from joint adoption; in Nebraska the state's Department of Social Services' policy prohibiting adoption by homosexual or unmarried couples has been sanctioned by the state's Supreme Court, which has also ruled against second-parent adoption.

echo of, the national political debate. But same-sex couples' recognition can be worked out at the local level, too, through domestic partnership in particular. And since counties or municipalities are more likely to be politically homogeneous than whole states, it can prove easier – under favourable political circumstances – to garner pro-LGBT support locally than state-wide. These characteristics of US federalism may in a sense prefigure developments in Europe as its integration moves forward, in that pioneering nation-states may pave the way for progress in more reluctant ones when political issues get debated at the continental level. But the main difference between American politics and Europe's prospective federalism is that the supra-national level in Europe seems readier than most member states to recognise LGBT families – almost the reverse of the imbalance between the local and state/national levels in the United States (Agius 2009; Banens 2010).

But LGBT families are not necessarily centred on a couple with or without children. Some LGBT organisations offer "safe homes" for LGBT youths who have fled abusive families, while others provide them with "foster grand-parents" – i.e. elderly couples or individuals without offspring with whom to pair up (Marche 2003). Other "families of choice" – as the anthropologist Kath Weston calls them (Weston 1991; 1993) – are simply made up of friends, including sometimes former sexual or romantic partners. All these configurations are alternatives to the monogamous, couple-centred model of the family, and they are often informal arrangements. So they make up *de facto* families which never seek *de jure* recognition, but they are none the less significant, for they make LGBT families a laboratory for the evolution of the family as a civil and cultural institution. They also encourage the LGBT movement to deal with the prominent issue of intergenerational permanence, transmission and renewal – which is particularly important in a context where AIDS has decimated the generation that created LGBT communities in American cities and launched the age of gay rights in the post-gay-liberation period of the early 1970s.

Even though, thirty years into the AIDS era, the archetype of the unattached, middle-aged promiscuous gay male no longer subsumes the image of the LGBT community, it is noteworthy that conservative campaigns do place the issue of sexuality at the heart of the LGBT families debate. For example, two major aspects of the Bush administration's "values" battle were its opposition to same-sex marriage and the promotion of abstinence-only-until-marriage sexual education (Greslé-Favier 2009). The two are clearly linked in the conservative right wing's agen-

da.<sup>41</sup> In fact, abstinence-only sexual education does not have to exclude same-sex attraction. But because it is explicitly geared toward promoting marriage it *is* likely to do so, and in effect does most of the time (Fischer 2009, 63). Conservative anti-LGBT discourse is indeed prone to such shortcuts, as the following example of the organisation Concerned Women for America illustrates. One article from the “Culture and Family Issues” section of its website entitled “What’s Best for the Children” reads:

In the popular film *Sleepless in Seattle*, a desperate little boy goes on the radio to seek a wife for his single father. He’s already got a great dad, played by Tom Hanks. The boy does not want another dad; he wants a mom. Yet, we’re told that public policy should be indifferent to that boy’s needs. To put it another way, do we really think the boy would not notice if, instead of getting new mom Meg Ryan, he wound up with a guy from *Queer as Folk* as his ‘second dad?’ (Knight 2005)

In this segment, “a guy from *Queer as Folk*” is used as shorthand for an effeminate freak and is made synonymous for “another dad.” Striking therefore is that this extract contrasts with the dominant tendency in conservative anti-LGBT discourses nowadays to present homosexuality as a choice – hence something morally wrong, which can be avoided, for example thanks to “reparative therapy”, but which can also be imposed on others, especially children (Brooke 2002). On the contrary, the author, Robert Knight, *essentialises* homosexuality in order to stigmatise it by casting the male homosexual as abnormal.

This is confirmed by another extract from the same article: “Who among us could say that *our father* could be replaced by *a lesbian*, and this would not have made any difference in our lives? Or that *our mother* could just as easily have been *a male homosexual*?” (Knight 2005; emphasis ours) The language here conflates sex and gender with sexual orientation, because the author does not simply emphasise a child’s alleged need to have parents of both sexes and genders – one female and one male –, he also labels the putative second mother or father as a homosexual, thus raising the fear of a sexually deviant adult warping the child’s morality. The essentialism is most obvious in that Knight gives pride of place to his opposition between the mother and the male homosexual, thus conjointly invoking the contrary mythic representations of motherly instinct and of the degenerate male pederast.

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<sup>41</sup> Abstinence-only until marriage was not launched by the Bush administration, but by the Clinton administration as of 1996; it *was* however the Bush administration which endowed it with massive funding (Cooper and Cates 2006, 64).

But the article goes further and claims:

yes, studies show that [when brought up by homosexual parents] girls are more likely to ‘be sexually adventurous and less chaste,’ including being more likely to try lesbianism, and that boys are more likely to have ‘fluid’ conceptions of gender roles, and that researchers should stop trying to cover this up in the hopes of pursuing a pro-homosexual agenda. The researchers said, in effect: *Some of the kids are more likely to turn out gay or bisexual, but so what?* (Knight 2005; italics in original)

Not only does this segment conflate parents’ sex and gender with their sexual orientation, it also lumps together parents’ sexual orientation with children’s sexual orientation, degree of sexual activity, *and* gender identification. What is more, far from impeding the piece’s capacity to convince, these conceptual flaws enhance it by addressing its readers’ deeper-seated, less rational anxieties, while at the same time cloaking them in pseudo-scientific language.<sup>42</sup> These examples provide a fairly representative illustration of the current state of the debate on the moral conservative side, which lead us to conclude that, regardless of LGBT advocates’ strategic options, the issue of youth sexuality is of the foremost importance in the LGBT families debate.

#### YOUTH SEXUALITY: A POLITICAL CATCH 22

But youth sexuality is such a risky topic that the LGBT movement deals with the LGBT families debate in an increasingly desexualised way. We analyse this strategy to argue that it is somewhat paradoxical, insofar as, at the same time, many issues of importance for *LGBT* youth are directly related to sexuality.

In the gay-marriage debate for instance, whereas anti-LGBT opponents frame their argument in terms of sexual behaviour,<sup>43</sup> proponents endeavour to skirt this obstacle by carrying the debate onto another plane, as the following two examples demonstrate. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has produced a series of half-hour documentaries entitled “Freedom Files,” which are based on the real-life experience of interviewees. These include a “gay and lesbian rights” episode and a “same-sex couples” episode, both of which focus on child-rearing, health insurance, and hospital visitation issues (ACLU [a]; [b]). The ACLU has

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly Knight’s assertions distort the findings of the studies in question, which show less gender conformity – i.e. criticism towards patriarchal gender roles – in lesbian families (Stacey and Biblarz 2001). See also Biblarz and Stacey 2010.

<sup>43</sup> e.g. Knight 2009.

also co-produced with Public Interest television a series of ten stories, entitled “10 Couples”, which is also based on real-life testimonies and additionally focuses on inheritance rights and adoption (ACLU and Public Interest). The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) in July 2006 ran a full-page newspaper advertisement in fifty publications nationwide, in which sixty civic, religious, trade-union and civil-rights leaders and organisations took a stand in favour of legalising same-sex marriage. The fact is that forty of the sixty leaders and organisations in question were specifically non-LGBT, and their arguments were framed strictly in terms on non-discrimination – including a comparison with the prohibition of mixed-race marriages in Southern US states until 1967 (NGLTF 2006).

These examples, taken from two of the leading national organisations defending LGBT rights in the US,<sup>44</sup> provide an apt illustration of how hard these advocates strive to relegate sexuality-related issues outside the scope of the gay-marriage debate, by focussing on bread-and-butter issues or by articulating the case for legalisation strictly in terms of formal rights.<sup>45</sup> Such a strategy is sensible insofar as it aims to deflect opponents’ harshest assaults, but it fails to address the symbolic dimension of opening marriage to same-sex couples other than by resorting to normification (Marche 2009; Hunter 1995).<sup>46</sup> The problem however is that sexuality-related issues are central to the public debate on youth in general. Thus anti-gay rights opponents insist on protecting the sexuality of non-LGBT youth by claiming that LGBT families represent a risk of homosexual “contamination” and that the struggle for their recognition is in fact an activist ploy for recruiting youths into the homosexual lifestyle – what radical moral conservatives call the “gay agenda”. Furthermore, we argue, the well-being of LGBT youth is more particularly affected by sexuality, since their sexual experience for instance disproportionately involves risky behaviour, such as unsafe sex, exposing them to HIV infection. Besides, many LGBT youth engage in heterosexual sex, so that, whether male or female, they are actually *more* liable to be exposed to unwanted pregnancies (Gilliam 2001; Saewyc *et al.* 2008).

<sup>44</sup> The ACLU is a general civil liberties defense organisation which does not exclusively or even primarily stand for LGBT rights, yet that is one of its key issues, so that the organisation’s great visibility and reputable record enable it to be a key player in the LGBT movement.

<sup>45</sup> For a definition of formal rights – as opposed to substantive rights – see Bottomore 1992.

<sup>46</sup> On the distinction between normification and normalization see Goffman 1990, 31–44.

So how is one to explain why the LGBT movement tends to *desexualise* its discussion of LGBT youths? Part of the explanation is linked to the current overall political context. Since the 1990s there has been a revival of sex panics used by conservatives in order to construct youth in general as an asexual sanctuary, thus manufacturing and manipulating public emotions in order to advance their political agenda (Irvine 2006). In addition to the publicising of scare stories involving alleged “predators” and young, innocent victims, there have been highly visible cases of child abuse by priests and politicians’ affairs with minors. Teenagers have even been indicted with child pornography for “sexting” – i.e. sending each other crude pictures of themselves on their mobile phones (Wypijewski 2009). Linking youth with sex in such a context clearly involves political danger.

But the desexualisation of LGBT youth by the LGBT movement began long before the 1990s sex panics. As far back as the gay-rights turn of the gay liberation movement in the early 1970s, when community building replaced sexual liberation at the top of the movement’s agenda (Armstrong 2002, 97–110), gay youths were provided with counselling, protection and advocacy because the plight of their disproportionate harassment and victimisation had become evident (Cohen 2005, 75–77). The 1970s movement thus laid the emphasis on sexual *identity*, as opposed to conduct, and by desexualising its approach to gay youths essentialised them into a reified identity group. Likewise, in the 1980s and 1990s, the LGBT movement sought to serve youth by advocating for the creation of gay-straight alliance in schools (Woog 1995, 268–279; Miceli 2005; Mayberry 2007). On the contrary, a recurrent trait of LGBT youths’ experience of sexuality is that it escapes, rather than follows, fixed identity categories, so that focussing on actual sexual desires, attraction and behaviour among them implies dealing with fluid identity categories and boundaries (Cohen 2002, 77–80).

These remarks suggest that the desexualisation of LGBT youth issues is but one side of the LGBT movement’s essentialist leaning, and conversely that its approach to LGBT youth in general, and their sexuality in particular, is an index of how offensive and daring that movement is prepared to be. In the late 1960s, for instance, the emergence of the gay liberation movement was triggered by LGBT youths who had grown impatient with the homophile movement’s conformity (Armstrong 2002, 62–68; D’Emilio 1998, 223–239). In other words, it was a youth-led initiative to celebrate homosexuality as a provocative form of sexual expression that spearheaded the homophile movement’s transformation into the gay lib-

eration movement (Cohen 2005, 72–74). In the early twenty-first century, on the contrary, LGBT youths' advocates insist on the dangers they face – suicide, HIV infection, substance use, violence and harassment, dropping out of school – and treat them as a fragile category in need of protection, rather than as a disenfranchised category in need of rights and recognition (Cohen 2005; Lehr 2008).

At this point in our discussion it is evident that the questions of LGBT families and LGBT youths expose the movement to attacks that primarily stigmatise homosexuality as a sexual conduct and as a choice. The movement however tends to react by claiming sexual orientation is primarily an identity and it is *not* a choice, and its current approach to youth issues is a sign of its growing essentialism – whereas it used to be a key aspect of its capacity for innovation. Considering that this state of affairs is at least partially driven by the overall political context, the question remains how the LGBT movement can get out of this political conundrum.

#### **LGBT YOUTH SEXUALITY: A CREATIVE CHALLENGE FOR THE LGBT MOVEMENT**

Despite the end of the Bush era and the relative tolerance or progressivism in some states or localities, US national politics is still a hostile political environment for the LGBT movement. After the lost hopes of the early 1990s – when a sympathetic new president failed to keep his strong campaign promise of symbolic integration in the armed forces – it is confronted with a counter-movement which has gained strength from the moral conservative climate of the 1980s, the “culture wars” of the 1990s, and the ideologically driven neo-conservatism of the 2000s. In this sense, LGBT youth in European countries enjoy somewhat better protection, since the more developed European welfare states put them in the care of social services and education systems which are more administrative – hence more secure from populist political morality campaigning than in the United States, where school boards are not only local, but elected. Though it may thus appear as a horrible foil to European countries, the United States should perhaps serve as a cautionary tale, since no country has foolproof indemnity from ignorance and intolerance – as the early-twenty-first century resurgence of bigoted ultra-nationalism in central and eastern, but also western and south-western, Europe shows. The answer to such a challenge lies in collective action, and so the question is how LGBT advocates in the US are to find ways of efficiently opposing their political foes (Miceli 2005, 592).

In arguing for abstinence-only-until-marriage sexual education, Concerned Women for America claims: “We don’t tell children not to do drugs and then give them clean syringes in case they do. We don’t tell them not to smoke and then give them low-tar cigarettes because those are the least harmful. We don’t do those things because they undermine the point we are trying to make.” (CWA 2006) When faced with such arguments, it is politically tempting for advocates for youth in general, and LGBT youth in particular, to resort to disclaimers and – be it tacitly – endorse the view that having sex at a young age jeopardises one’s well-being. An alternative, offensive posture would be *not* to make excuses for the fact that youths do have sex, and to expose attempts to curb youth sexuality as not simply ineffective, but also *wrong*. Especially in the case of LGBT youth, abstinence-only education indeed denies rights that are already abridged: whereas LGBT youths’ right to sexual and gender expression is consistently denied, the enforcement of abstinence-only programs further violates their right to free information about safer sex and birth control, a right deriving in particular from the First Amendment to the US Constitution, as well as from the United Nations’ 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>47</sup>

In other words, LGBT youth sexuality issues both represent a symptom of the problem and offer insights into worthwhile solutions. The LGBT movement’s political goal, from this perspective, is to stand for youths’ empowerment, in the sense of enhancing their capacity to negotiate sexual relations and to make informed decisions. In addition to affirming a set of rights, this posture has a strategic justification: it avoids being trapped in a discussion of what is good or bad about youth sexuality, or what is the right time for young people to be sexually active, instead taking the issue onto the political plane of the actual, social contexts in which youths make decisions about sexuality (Waites 2005, 29–30). At stake then is no longer whether, or how much, youths ought to be disciplined, but how to keep them out of unfair treatment and to empower them by “challeng[ing] the unequal social contexts in which [youths’ moral agency] is embedded” (*ibid.*, 30).

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<sup>47</sup> “Congress shall make no law … abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” (US Constitution, Amendment I); “The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 13)

The question then remains to what extent the movement is equipped to address these questions. As a matter of fact the resources do exist in the LGBT social movement field for addressing youths as leaders and agents producing empowerment – instead of clients receiving services (Cohen 2005, 77–78). An organisation that is neither led by, nor specifically meant for, LGBT youth, Advocates for Youth, does stand for their rights, for example by producing sex-positive sexual education material, but also campaign material such as talking points on youth sexuality issues (Advocates for Youth 2006). The organisation thus does not simply engage in lobbying and advocacy on youths' behalf, it also fosters grassroots campaigning (Azrak *et al.* 2005). Another example is the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC), an organisation for and of LGBT youth. It participates in the Coalition for Positive Sexuality (CPS), producing positive material about youth sexuality which presents sex as a fulfilling experience and offers resources for activism as well as for services (CPS 2008). Additionally, many sex-positive, online LGBT youth forums provide peer-produced information, safe space for debate, and resources for grassroots organising (Cohen 2005, 80). These are but a few examples of existing organisations and initiatives which foster empowerment through agency by giving voice to LGBT youth's experience of sexuality.

#### CONCLUSION

As in Europe, the recognition of same-sex unions is a high-profile aspect of the LGBT families debate in the United States. But perhaps more than in Europe, the LGBT movement there has made possible the emergence of alternative LGBT “families of choice”, facilitated in part by legal loopholes and political opportunities resulting from the structure of American federalism, which distributes power among three levels of government – federal, state, and local – and sometimes allows local issues to remain below the radar of national politics, thus making room for discreet, yet effective and significant policy innovations. This prominent issue however confronts the LGBT movement with a very fierce opposition, which challenges it to take stock of the connection between issues of LGBT families and of youth sexuality, on which the LGBT movement must consequently take a stance. The more often chosen, longer established strategy however consists in deflecting accusations of trying to “convert” youths to the “homosexual lifestyle” by desexualising the approach to issues concerning LGBT youth, which in turn tends to essentialise them as a fixed identity category. On the contrary it was LGBT

youths' offensiveness about sexuality and their refusal of essentialism which historically drove the LGBT movement forward in various periods of growth.

But unlike Europe, issues regarding youth, sexual orientation, and sexuality are subjected in the United States to the political sanction of public debates and elections where radical moral conservatives have great sway. As a result, the LGBT movement there is subjected to heightened vulnerability. At the same time, however, the politicisation of youth sexuality implies that the issue is up for deliberation in the contentious, democratic political arena, which offers the LGBT social movement a political opportunity to jump into the fray, shed caution, and take the offensive by framing sexuality issues in terms of LGBT youths' *rights*. This can be done by empowering LGBT youths to speak on the basis of their experience. As we have suggested, the movement has both organisational and grassroots resources to do so. Moreover, given that moral conservatives' religious fundamentalist ideology provides their discourse with a built-in advantage for a discussion of moral values, framing the debate on LGBT youth in terms of rights is a reasonable strategy. It allows the LGBT movement to address, rather than dodge, the issue of youth sexuality which is embedded in the LGBT families debate, and hence allows it to be less defensively poised in confronting its opponents. While this political situation is to some extent specific to the American LGBT movement, the conclusions to which it leads may serve as an inspiration for European advocates of LGBT families.

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