

The New Outsiders: An Allegory For Our Times

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The "outsider", as characterized by Colin Wilson in his seminal book of the 1950s, was an individual who stood apart from society, who lived an internal existence that separated him or her both intellectually and emotionally from mainstream society, and who epitomized the existential anomie of the times. The new outsiders, in contrast, are not self-defined. They are individuals who, by their life-style, beliefs, and/ or preferences, are perceived as different from conformist societal "norms" and therefore of less value. They are the social equivalent of the lepers of previous times, the scapegoats for our culture's shortcomings. Often victims or casualties, they are made to bear the blame for their own victimization, which allows the society which spawned them to forego any sense of responsibility for their plight.

This essay is an essay of indignation, a heart-felt protest against the marginalization of those that society does not value, and a plea to readers to fight against the callous indifference, if not outright hostility, that so many of our culture hold in relation to the "new outsiders." We must publicly question the implicit assumptions, stemming from our Puritan heritage of predestination, that the victim is to blame. We must alter the ground rules of the public dialogue to demonstrate clearly and decisively what the mainstream truly is. We must be pro-active rather than re-active. We must regain the ground that our own indifference has ceded to the fundamentalists, the bigots, and the anti-intellectuals of all denominations.

It was little more than a decade ago that televangelists and their "disciples" such as Anita Bryant started a big campaign to raise big money. Was their purpose to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless, an increasingly sizeable proportion of the population in the Reagan and subsequent years? No way. The money was earmarked for a single purpose - to mount a vicious publicity campaign against the gay and lesbian community of San Francisco. The response of our society to initiatives such as this is inextricably linked to our society's response to the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic, and serves as an exemplar of the moral and mortal sickness at the core of our culture.

Divine Retribution

In the late 1970's, an increasing percentage of gay and lesbian individuals came "out of the closet", refusing any longer to concur implicitly with the attitude of many heterosexuals that homosexuality was unnatural and sinful. In the larger cities especially, such as New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, where homosexual preference was more tolerated and individuals' lifestyles were less subject to the monitoring of family members and neighbors, it was possible for gays and lesbians to meet partners and live their own lives. (The spirit and openness of this time, as well as the increasingly visible stance taken by gays and lesbians, are excellently documented by Randy Shilts in his important book, *And The Band Played On.*) Of course, this increased visibility was a direct affront to those, such as the Moral Majority, who considered homosexuality a sickness and a sin, and a homosexual lifestyle thus a choice rather than an inner imperative. This attitude led to the publicity campaign mentioned above.

It is ironic that, at about this same time, the AIDS virus - HIV - began to infect the gay population. Possibly brought into this country by an airline steward who caught this disease in Africa, it was spread throughout the gay community by the permissive

lifestyle associated with gays' increasing acceptance, at least in urban areas, into mainstream society. In retrospect, the long incubation time of this virus - the gap between initial infection and the presentation of AIDS-related symptoms - was an equally significant factor in its appearance in the gay community. By the time cases of the "gay cancer" began to be seen in the examination rooms of doctors' offices and the emergency rooms of hospitals, AIDS was, as we know now, well established in the urban gay population.

A third factor enters into this recipe for tragedy - the changing ethos of society in the United States. For whatever reasons historians eventually identify, American society took a turn toward a more conservative, puritanical, fundamentalist set of viewpoints, symbolized and spearheaded by the election of Ronald Reagan to the Presidency. It was a time when a neo-social Darwinism of laissez faire economics and social policy elevated greed, ruthlessness, and indifference toward others to the highest levels of social good, while diminishing a sense of social responsibility to those "unfit to compete" (e.g., the homeless). Increased hostility to homosexuality resulted from this conservative shift, and was fostered by the increased visibility and vocalness of fundamentalist Christian spokespeople. As a result, the apparently sudden appearance of a new, fatal disease that seemed only to attack gays was greeted as God's divine retribution for the unnatural and sinful behavior of these people, and was treated with indifference by others.

Public Health, Private Agendas

When I was a graduate student in Chicago in the early 1970s, I took out a subscription to *The New Yorker*. I was homesick for the sharp-edged humor of the Northeast, and found it in the weekly cartoons, the movie reviews by Pauline Kael and Penelope Gilliatt, and the fillers at the end of columns of text. During this time, articles would appear at approximately monthly intervals

describing how investigators from the US Public Health Service tracked down the sources of diseases and prevented their spread before they grew to epidemic proportions. Each article was about a different disease situation, and ranged from the identification of new rabies vectors in the Southwest to the outbreak of an obscure disease in a hospital where the affected patients appeared not to have any factor in common. I was enthralled, and looked forward to every new installment of a series that I mentally titled, "The Daring Adventures of the US Public Health Service", because of its innovative combination of detective work and medical expertise. Just so had I read practically everything written by Paul de Kruif when I was younger and, for me, these medical investigators -whether scientists delving in the lab or fieldworkers interviewing infected individuals to trace the source of a disease outbreak -were true heroes.

Through reading these stories, I also picked up some degree of understanding as to how such field investigations were conducted. Affected individuals would be questioned about every aspect of their lives in the minutest detail- diet and specific food sources, contacts, lifestyle, etc. - and the results put together to determine what factor or factors they had in common. Whether a disease appeared to be infectious or communicable or whether it was environmental, the hierarchy of contacts would slowly and patiently be developed and traced back to the initiating source (e.g., a contaminated water supply or an apparently disease-free carrier as in the case of "Typhoid Mary"). Based on these findings, a strategy for stopping or curtailing disease spread could be formulated and implemented. Such investigative procedures are equally well suited for the characterization of a new disease- its mechanism of infection, its incubation period, and its warning signs - if such information is properly collected, correlated, and analyzed.

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At the start of the AIDS epidemic, the US Public Health Service was mobilized. Investigators from the Center for Disease Control were sent to San Francisco and Los Angeles and New York to collect information on this new disease that appeared to affect only gay men, and their untiring efforts, along with those of some (but certainly not all) local public health officials, were well documented by Randy Shilts. People suffering from the opportunistic diseases associated with full-blown AIDS were exhaustively questioned, and long and detailed questionnaires filled out. Hundreds of completed questionnaires were initially accumulated. The answers lay right there, needing only the logical next step(s) of correlation and analysis for them to appear.

It was horrifying to read in Shilts's book what happened next. Support for the investigation by the CDC was slowly withdrawn, and investigators reassigned to other projects. Computer time for inputting and analyzing the data from the questionnaires was withheld. Resources critical to the characterization of the mode of spread of AIDS were reallocated elsewhere. The reason was simple - and political. This new disease was indeed fatal, but since it only affected gay men - individuals outside of the mainstream of society whose godless behavior was an offense to all right-thinking people - there was no justification for using public funds to preserve their lives and the lives of others like them. The AIDS virus was God's retribution for the bare-faced and open immorality of these homosexuals; far be it for a US government agency to stand in His way.

Divine Retribution (continued)

The broad-ranging consequences of this politically and religiously inspired policy are well known. Because investigators from the CDC were denied the resources necessary to characterize the mode of transmission and incubation period of the HIV, and thus to restrict or stem its spread:

- . Thousands more gay and bisexual individuals were infected;
- . These infected people served as a broader base for the spread of AIDS more rapidly and extensively into the community through sexual relations, blood transfusions, and shared paraphernalia associated with intravenous drug use;
- . The development of a blood test for the HIV was significantly delayed through a combination of ignorance of its mode of transmission and incubation period, the greed of those involved in the sale of blood and blood-derived products (such as clotting factor), and denial of the idea that a "gay" disease would infect heterosexuals;
- . Haitians, hemophiliacs, and intravenous drug users also being marginal to mainstream society, the appearance of AIDS in these populations was sensationalized at the same time that it was separated from a sense of threat or concern to most people;
- . The continuing hypocritical denial concerning the sexual activity of teenagers, combined with a continuing coyness about birth control devices, led to the almost unchecked spread of the HIV into the teen and young adult population;
- . The HIV has now been spread throughout the world, where the number of infected individuals continues to grow exponentially;
- . As a consequence of the reduced disease resistance of HIV-positive individuals and those suffering from AIDS, especially in poor communities, regions, and countries, other diseases that constitute serious public health risks in and of themselves (e.g., antibiotic-resistant tuberculosis) are threatening the world population.

More simply, the denial of essential resources at a critical initial time in the disease cycle has resulted in a death sentence, either directly through HIV infection or indirectly through the resurgence of "old" diseases, to millions of people around the world. If this tragic situation is indeed divine retribution, it might be more appropriate to ask against whom this retribution is directed. At the present time in our society, one of the groups most at risk are our children, who consider themselves immortal ("it can't happen to me!"), and who are denied essential information to empower them enough to protect themselves. It is only now (January of 1994), more than two decades after the first appearance of HIV in the United States, that the word "condom" is being used on radio and television in public service advertisements, and for some of the media, "condom" can only be used publicly in carefully restricted time slots.

It has become almost fashionable to be indignant about the spread of AIDS and to extend sympathy, if not resources, to those who are infected now that the disease has stricken the mainstream community. People in the public eye wear their red ribbons; benefit concerts and performances are scheduled; activist groups have achieved a level of respectability and clout that would have been impossible just a few years ago; and the HIV is being studied in a steadily widening number of labs and clinical settings. Most notably, Hollywood and Broadway have discovered AIDS ("And The Band Played On - The Movie", "Philadelphia", "Angels in America"). In the meantime, the virus spreads almost unchecked throughout Africa and elsewhere, which will in turn lead to the resurgence of other diseases throughout the world.

To carry the irony of the concept of divine retribution to its ultimate limit, one need only examine one of the hypotheses about how the HIV developed originally. While many accept that the HIV was a natural mutation of a virus that infects the green monkey and a few extremists contend that the HIV was developed

in the laboratory of racist Europeans and/ or European-Americans to commit genocide on Africans and those of African descent, one school of thought suggests that the HIV was mutated by accident from the green monkey virus during attempts to develop a polio vaccine in the 1950s. As described in an article in *Rolling Stone*, the (unsuccessful) vaccine, developed by researchers at the Fox Chase Institute in Philadelphia, was tested in Africa, infecting the test population with what would later be known as the HIV; it must be emphasized here that, although the timing and geography of this hypothesis are consistent with the chronology of the virus spread, it remains unproven. If true, however, then the continued use and abuse of Third World populations for the testing of pharmaceuticals, the dumping of products no longer acceptable in First World countries (e.g., DDT, baby food), etc. has indeed been turned around with a vengeance. Divine retribution indeed...

Community and Conformity

The United States has always consisted, at least in part, of outsiders. The Amish, for example, maintain a cultural tradition completely at odds with our increasingly technological society; they are tolerated because they can be completely ignored. Other groups of outsiders, such as Native Americans or Mormons, are tolerated only insofar as they remain separate from our culture and make no demands upon it; in the former case, treaties and agreements have consistently been broken whenever the interests of the larger society were at odds with the Native Americans, while in the latter case, the illegality of polygamy was enforced when Utah became a State. Thus, the currently fashionable concept of "diversity", like previous forms of "tolerance", is truly endorsed only in areas where the differences from the societal ethos are trivial or essentially unthreatening. Food preparation styles, modes of dress, even (within limits) religious beliefs, can be diverse as long as, in important ways, individuals share the overall social values (i.e., are assimilated).

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This is not necessarily a bad thing. Commonality of interests and values, however repugnant this may seem to some, is essential for the long-term stability of a society, and it is reasonable to set limits, whether explicit or implicit, to maintain this commonality. Many of our laws are reflections of the societal concept of commonality and, as society gradually changes, new laws and new interpretations of old laws come into being. An example is the concept of "privacy", which has been developed in fits and starts over the past decades through our legal system, but especially through the Supreme Court.

While there is nothing in the Constitution that explicitly relates to "privacy", the direction of many landmark decisions in this century has led to a body of law where the right of privacy is implicitly both defined and bounded. Another example is what constitutes "cruel and unusual punishment"; some legal specialists would argue today that the death penalty itself falls into this category, but certainly we no longer put people into the stocks or use other forms of punishment that were common in earlier centuries.

The question then becomes - what constitutes a society or a community? In the past, where communication was limited and people tended to remain in the same geographical region for their entire lives, the essential size of a community was small. In the post-Civil War, pre-civil rights South, for example, European- and African- American communities were essentially independent of each other; although existing side-by-side geographically, they were culturally distinct, and severe penalties were levied (either legally or informally) for encroachments between the two. Here, as in the examples above, "tolerance" was not so much the result of empathy as of isolation from alternative formulations of values and priorities. "Outsiders", in the sense that I am using the term, were often more easily assimilated into these narrow communities because of blood ties, familiarity, and/ or pride in the expression

of eccentricity; where tolerance was absent, the alternative then, like today, was a move to an urban area where social monitoring was reduced or absent, and where like-minded individuals could be sure to find each other.

Two major factors have combined to alter this state of affairs. The increased mobility of populations today, both in the United States and internationally, has greatly reduced the level of local 'community' loyalty and bonding, tending, if not to homogenize the population, then at least to mix it in an odd assortment of patterns. But even more devastating has been the growth and spread of the electronic media, especially television and the cinema. The media implicitly communicate information about lifestyles, social values, and ethical and moral decision-making through their set decoration, selection and physical appearance of actors, story lines, and problem resolution. It is no accident that special-interest groups as diverse as fundamentalist Christian organizations and the country of France object vociferously to the insidious influence on their own cultural values of these portrayals.

The loosening of community bonds due to population mobility and the strong influence of the media in depicting our society lead inevitably to the necessity of redefining what a community is. It could be argued (and has been in a number of contexts) that the contemporary community covers a large geographic region, usually a conglomerate of adjacent states (e.g., the Northeast), with the traditional tension between the urban and non-urban subcultures reduced but not eliminated. For certain aspects of "community", the homogenizing factor of the media may lead to a definition that is even more inclusive; in some respects, the US and Canadian cultures share a single identity (a fact that represents a threat to a number of Canadians).

Whatever the specific factors brought to bear in defining a community, the homogenization resulting from population mobility and the contributions of the media also affects the range of societal interests and values associated with this community by narrowing them within boundaries that are acceptable to the larger community group. I.e., the effect of the increased community size is in the direction of increased conformity rather than increased diversity, with concomitant narrowing of the range of acceptable eccentricities and beliefs. People today are confronted with many more lifestyle and belief alternatives than could have ever been conceived of by them in the past. The potential uncertainties of this broad palette of alternatives, combined with the strong desire to find social acceptance within a community as soon as possible after a given move, results in the limiting of lifestyle choices for more rapid social assimilation.

Added to this trend is the particular cultural heritage that is unique to the United States, which implicitly determines the specific form that the societal norm takes. The religion of the Puritans was a form of Calvinism that had as its central tenet pre-destination - the concept that individuals' souls were either saved or damned before they ever appeared on this earth. How did one know into which class a given individual fell? It was believed that those who were "saved" basked in God's grace; thus, the level of their success during their lifetimes would be an indication of their eventual post-demise destination. The clearest, easiest-to-monitor indication of success would, of course, be the accumulation of material goods - **wealth**.

While the idea of pre-destination has not survived as a popular central religious concept, the factors associated with determining one's eventual fate certainly have - classification of individuals' worth by their material success, the absence of an association between good works and salvation, and the like. Clearly, in these terms, people who have unfortunate experiences, who are

victimized, who fall prey to disease or poverty or accident, are not among the "saved", and therefore are implicitly responsible for their victimization. This historical influence of Puritanism fits in very well with the neo-social Darwinism of the 1980s, where a contemporary form of survival of the fittest (i.e., most ruthless, most well-informed as insiders, most greedy, most shut off from recognition of those trampled on as individuals in their own right) could be morally and socially justified.

Thus, the larger contemporary "community" is associated with a more narrowly acceptable set of interests and values. For American society, these interests and values have been distorted by cultural inheritance into a form of social Darwinism that absolves the majority from responsibility for the minority, and in fact provides justification for marginalization of an increasing percentage of people whose beliefs and/ or lifestyles differentiate them from the "norm." These values are propagated through the media, which also determine whose voices are heard. (On a recent NPR program, for example, one commentator noted that the range of political viewpoints presented in discussion-format programs is actually quite narrow, with the "liberal" spokesperson being more centrist than left-wing.) While it has been argued that American society is becoming fragmented by special interests, a direction apparently exactly opposite to what I have been saying, I would respond that this phenomenon is part of the process of increasing conformity, since each group is seeking the establishment of their own viewpoint as the social norm in an attempt to avoid marginalization.

Conclusions and Conclusion

The story of the AIDS epidemic can potentially be the story of any group which is, or allows itself to be, marginalized. At the present time, the terms "secular Humanist", "feminist", and "liberal", to note just a few, have acquired pejorative connotations,

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and to identify oneself with anyone of these labels is to be put immediately on the defensive and to accept "new outsider" status in most social contexts. The basis or bases for public discourse have been seriously, perhaps irretrievably, narrowed by indifference and social pressures toward conformity. The cities, traditionally the havens for expression of alternative lifestyles, beliefs, and preferences, are gradually being disenfranchised as voices in the social order through decay, neglect, and the marginalization of smaller communities within the larger grouping. The only way to combat these forces is to promote empathy for others, to teach acceptance and appreciation rather than "tolerance", and essentially to create an ethos where true diversity - and not the pale and etiolated current version - is encouraged and valued within the larger framework of respect for human dignity and potential. In other words, those of us who call ourselves Humanists, either publicly or privately, must take the responsibility to live, and live up to, what we profess to believe. To do otherwise is not only a betrayal of our friends and our beliefs, but a betrayal of our fundamental selves.

Suggested Readings

Randy Shilt's book *And The Band Played On* is the most complete chronicle of the AIDS epidemic available, and I cannot recommend it too highly. (Forget the movie.)

Rolling Stone Magazine is noted for its idiosyncratic feature articles, and the one on the origins of the human immunodeficiency virus is particularly weird. I enjoyed it immensely, but recommend that it be taken with more than a few pinches of salt.

I admired Arthur Schlesinger's book, *The Disuniting of America* (as did many others, since it spent a good period of time on the

best-seller lists). As I hope is clear in this essay, however, I believe that this apparent fragmentation is an intermediate step on the road to an increasingly conformist society, with various groups either vying for the central position or incoherently protesting the process of their marginalization by advocating secession.

A strong influence on me in this context has been the science-fiction novel *Shockwave Rider* by John Brunner. His extrapolation of current cultural trends into a future society - highly mobile, highly technological, and highly conformist - where the "plug-in" lifestyle enables immediate assimilation seems of even greater merit today than when it was first published nearly two decades ago.

As for the Puritans and their Calvinist roots, there is a plethora of excellent intellectual and cultural histories of these colonists available from the library. For true literary masochists, I recommend the text of any of a number of sermons by Jonathan Edwards.

Finally, there is *The Outsider* by Colin Wilson, which started it all.. .

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