

# THE TROUBLE WITH NORMAL

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*Michael Wyeld*

Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal: An Argument About Homosexuality*, Picador, London 1995, £14.99 hardback.

The press have begun to use Andrew Sullivan as a touchstone and soundbite whenever the need to discuss 'the homosexual question' arises. He has become so recognisable as a celebrity, particularly in the United States, that he has joined the likes of Miles Davis, John Wayne, Sonic Youth and Leonard Bernstein in posing for advertisements for clothing giant The Gap. The press release for his book, written by Sullivan's press agent at Hobsbawm Macaulay Communications Limited, introduces the themes evident in press reviews, which creates a series of questions in its own way. For example, do the press actually read the books they review? The implication in press release is that Sullivan, the editor of the *New Republic*, is now a welcome spokesmodel for homosexuals in Europe and America.

Andrew Sullivan ... has written the most important book about homosexuality ever to be published: *Virtually Normal*, a crystal-clear exploration of the arguments about homosexuality from the Catholic Church to today's liberal and conservative politics.

In this era of controversy about homosexuality, from gay marriage to gays in the military, Andrew Sullivan's *Virtually Normal* will set off an unprecedented debate.

In the corporate publicity business anything can be made to seem credible and interesting, so it is no surprise that after actually reading Sullivan's book, it is nothing like 'the most important book about homosexuality ever to be published.' Nor does the book discuss 'the controversy about homosexuality, from gay marriage to gays in the military', although it does discuss gay marriage *and* gays in the military. It is more simple an argument than the press have claimed and, surprisingly for an editor the likes of Sullivan, it is rather dry.

Nevertheless the publicists have won this round, their contracted enthusiasm for Sullivan has leaked into the press. For example, in a preamble to an interview in the 'new man' magazine, *Maxim*, Sullivan is 'as near as dammit to being a gay icon.' November 1995's issue of *Maxim* then uses Sullivan to speak on behalf of, if not all homosexuals, then at least on behalf of all gay men:

Gay men and straight men have so much in common – far more than either

of us share with women. I mean, basically we're all lads who want to go out and get drunk with our mates ... There's a genuine equality in gay relationships. Both partners are autonomous and often self-supporting. And there are no 'norms', so everything gets negotiated from scratch. You have to decide on basic things like commitment, fidelity, how much time to spend together. And gay relationships often allow each partner a little bit of infidelity, which creates a feeling of space. Although I realise a lot of women wouldn't feel comfortable with that at all.

Sullivan's argument in *Virtually Normal* goes something like this: there are four basic approaches to homosexuality – The Prohibitionists, The Liberationists, The Conservatives and The Liberals. Sullivan seeks to show that everyone who has an opinion on homosexuality fits into the first four approaches or some combination of them. His own approach – the privileged one – involves a desire to reclaim Christianity, maintain a political conservatism and be homosexual.

Andrew Sullivan's is the kind of discussion that is frighteningly authoritative – it feels like something that cannot be questioned by mere mortals. The tactic is rather simple – by explaining all the possible moral approaches to homosexuality that political science has to offer, Sullivan wants to indicate his expertise. In other words he knows you better than you do. His expertise is underscored by his publicists and the press – he got a first at Oxford, he got a PhD from Harvard, he is the editor of the *New Republic*. And he hasn't merely *been* to Oxford, he was president of the union. Ignored in the discussion is the diversity of opinion found among the stakeholders – homosexuals. Sullivan claims he knows what lesbians and gays need, no matter what experience might have to say. In Sullivan's world view it doesn't matter how many lesbians and gays get involved in the peace movement or start S&M groups or advocate multiple partners, what they really want is a strong military and the right to get married. His notions about the 'gay scene' leave one wondering if Sullivan lives in a parallel universe with an entirely different collection of homosexuals to this one. In one of Sullivan's less thoughtful moments, he writes: 'I also learned how the subcultural fact of gay life rendered it remarkably democratic: in gay bars, there was far less socioeconomic stratification than in heterosexual bars. The shared experience of same-sex desire cut through class and race; it provided a humbling experience, which allowed many of us to risk our hearts and our friendships with people we otherwise might never have met. It loosened us up ...' (p203).

For many lesbians and gays on the left it is difficult to imagine 'one of their own kind' who votes Conservative. But it happens, and there are large numbers of lesbians and gays who align themselves politically as Conservative. This is really no surprise. As has been suggested by various 'Queer' commentators, sexual attraction is insufficient to explain someone's politics. Lesbian and gay conservatives, like Andrew Sullivan, are quick not only to advocate a more conservative economic agenda, they also support a more conservative moral

agenda. Although perhaps shunned by traditional (read straight) conservatives, they are nevertheless part of what has become known as the New Right. Jeffrey Weeks, although not recognising that there are homosexuals who would identify with the New Right, notes,

In the New Right vision of social order the family has a policing role. It ensures carefully demarcated spheres between men and women, adults and children. It regulates sexual relations and sexual knowledge. It enforces discipline and proper respect for authority. It is a harbour of moral responsibility and the work ethic. This is contrasted to the ostensible moral chaos that exists outside.<sup>1</sup>

1. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and its Discontents*, Routledge, London 1985, p43.

High on the agenda for gay conservatives has been marriage rights. Perhaps within this agenda is the desire that other homosexuals might gain new respect for conservative ideals like work ethics and respect for authority, if only they were part of a legally recognised family. In the *Maxim* article mentioned earlier Sullivan remarked, 'A lot of us pretend that we don't [want gay marriage]. We say that it's patriarchal and heterosexist. But that's just rationalisation – we don't want what we can't have. Marriage is the most central institution there is.... New research suggests that committed relationships between gay men last longer than those between heterosexuals or even lesbians.'

In the wake of the terrible image thrust on gay men in the aftermath of the onslaught of the AIDS epidemic, the image of the healthy, wealthy, gay professional in a stable, monogamous relationship has been welcomed by the gay community. Sullivan is keen to promote this view of homosexuals, 'We are your businessmen and -women, who built and sustained this economy for homosexual and heterosexual alike ... We need nothing from you, but we have much to give back to you' (p176). There's no doubt Sullivan's intentions are honest. The final chapter, the best written section of the book, is a sentimental look at his own life. Its effect is minimised by the conclusion drawn from his experiences of 'coming out'.

In the book's press release, Sullivan is quoted as saying, 'this is the argument of my life and I have to win it.' Sullivan's attitude indicates a man who believes that the world operates like an Oxford Student Union debating society. It doesn't. He is no radical, no spokesperson. He is just a loudmouth magazine editor with an expensive education, who just 25 years ago would have preferred the safety of his closet full of Gap T-shirts.