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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

4 The Gay Liberation Movement

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On Friday, June 27, 1969, shortly before midnight, two detectives from Manhattan's Sixth Precinct set off with a few other officers to raid the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar on Christopher Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. They must have expected it to be a routine raid. New York was in the midst of a mayoral campaign – always a bad time for the city's homosexuals – and John Lindsay, the incumbent who had recently lost his party's primary, had reason to agree to a police cleanup. Moreover, a few weeks earlier the Sixth Precinct had received a new commanding officer who marked his entry into the position by initiating a series of raids on gay bars. The Stonewall Inn was an especially inviting target. Operating without a liquor license, reputed to have ties with organized crime, and offering scantily clad go-go boys as entertainment, it brought an "unruly" element to Sheridan Square, a busy Village intersection. Patrons of the Stonewall tended to be young and nonwhite. Many were drag queens, and many came from the burgeoning ghetto of runaways living across town in the East Village.

However, the customers at the Stonewall that night responded in any but the usual fashion. As the police released them one by one from inside the bar, a crowd accumulated on the street. Jeers and catcalls arose from the onlookers when a paddy wagon departed with the bartender, the Stonewall's bouncer, and three drag queens. A few minutes later, an officer attempted to steer the last of the patrons, a lesbian, through the bystanders to a nearby patrol car. "She put up a struggle," the *Village Voice* (July 3, 1969, p. 18) reported, "from car to door to car again." At that moment,

the scene became explosive. Limp wrists were forgotten. Beer cans and bottles were heaved at the windows and a rain of coins descended on the cops. . . . Almost by signal the crowd erupted into cobblestone and bottle heaving. . . . From nowhere came an uprooted parking meter – used as a battering ram on the Stonewall door. I heard several cries of "let's get some gas," but the blaze of flame which soon appeared in the window of the Stonewall was still a shock.

Reinforcements rescued the shaken officers from the torched bar, but their work had barely started. Rioting continued far into the night, with Puerto Rican transvestites and young street people leading charges against rows of uniformed police officers and then withdrawing to regroup in Village alleys and side streets.

By the following night, graffiti calling for "Gay Power" had appeared along Christopher Street. Knots of young gays – effeminate, according to most reports – gathered on corners, angry and restless. Someone heaved a sack of wet garbage through the window of a patrol car. On nearby Waverly Place, a concrete block landed on the hood of another police car that was quickly surrounded by dozens of men, pounding on its doors and dancing on its hood. Helmeted officers from the tactical patrol force arrived on the scene and dispersed with swinging clubs an impromptu chorus line of gay men in the middle of a full kick. At the intersection of Greenwich Avenue and Christopher Street, several dozen queens screaming "Save Our Sister!" rushed a group of officers who were clubbing a young man and dragged him to safety. For the next few

hours, trash flew through the air. "Gay Power!" rang from the crowd numbering over 100. The riot was the first gay riot in the history of the city.

After the second night, the riot was channeled into a parade. What many had expected was the first gay riot in the history of the city. When he arrived in the evening, he had already taken a look at the guys there were reporters. "The fact that fags all have a right to be in New York Mattachine Society special riot was characterized as "The Hair World." It was the end of July, we had formed the self-proclaimed in the style of Stonewall riot among the networked across the gay liberation movement on college around the nation.

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hours, trash fires blazed, bottles and stones flew through the air, and cries of "Gay Power!" rang in the streets as the police, numbering over 400, did battle with a crowd estimated at more than 2,000.

After the second night of disturbances, the anger that had erupted into street fighting was channeled into intense discussion of what many had begun to memorialize as the first gay riot in history. Allen Ginsberg's stature in the 1960s had risen almost to that of guru for many counterculture youth. When he arrived at the Stonewall on Sunday evening, he commented on the change that had already taken place. "You know, the guys there were so beautiful," he told a reporter. "They've lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago." The New York Mattachine Society hastily assembled a special riot edition of its newsletter that characterized the events, with camp humor, as "The Hairpin Drop Heard Round the World." It scarcely exaggerated. Before the end of July, women and men in New York had formed the Gay Liberation Front, a self-proclaimed revolutionary organization in the style of the New Left. Word of the Stonewall riot and GLF spread rapidly among the networks of young radicals scattered across the country, and within a year gay liberation groups had sprung into existence on college campuses and in cities around the nation.

The Stonewall riot was able to spark a nationwide grassroots "liberation" effort among gay men and women in large part because of the radical movements that had so inflamed much of American youth during the 1960s. Gay liberation used the demonstrations of the New Left as recruiting grounds and appropriated the tactics of confrontational politics for its own ends. The ideas that suffused youth protest found their way into gay liberation, where they were modified and adapted to describe the oppression of homosexuals and lesbians. The apocalyptic rhetoric and the sense of impending revolution that surrounded the Movement by the end of the decade gave to its newest participants an audacious dar-

ing that made the dangers of a public avowal of their sexuality seem insignificant.

In order to make their existence known, gay liberationists took advantage of the almost daily political events that young radicals were staging across the country. New York's Gay Liberation Front had a contingent at the antiwar march held in the city on October 15, 1969, and was present in even larger numbers at the November moratorium weekend in Washington, where almost half a million activists rallied against American involvement in Southeast Asia. Gay radicals in Berkeley performed guerrilla theater on the campus during orientation that fall and carried banners at the November antiwar rally in San Francisco. In November 1969 and again the following May, lesbians from GLF converged on the Congress to Unite Women, which brought to New York women's liberationists from around the East. Gay activists ran workshops at the 1969 annual convention of the National Student Association. In May 1970 a GLF member addressed the rally in New Haven in support of Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, the imprisoned Black Panther leaders. A large contingent of lesbians and gay men attended the national gathering called by the Panthers in the fall of 1970, and the next year a gay "tribe" took part in the May Day protests in Washington against the war. In raising the banner of gay liberation at these and other local demonstrations, radical gays reached closeted homosexuals and lesbians in the Movement who already had a commitment to militant confrontational politics. Their message traveled quickly through the networks of activists created by the New Left, thus allowing gay liberation to spread with amazing rapidity.

The first gay liberationists attracted so many other young radicals not only because of a common sexual identity but because they shared a similar political perspective. Gay liberationists spoke in the hyperbolic phrases of the New Left. They talked of liberation from oppression, resisting genocide, and making a revolution against "imperialist Amerika." GLF's statement of

purpose, printed in the New Left newspaper *RAT* (August 12, 1969), sounded like many of the documents produced by radicals in the late 1960s, except that it was written by and about homosexuals:

We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society's attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature. We are stepping outside these roles and simplistic myths. We are going to be who we are. At the same time, we are creating new social forms and relations, that is, relations based upon brotherhood, cooperation, human love, and uninhibited sexuality. Babylon has forced us to commit ourselves to one thing - revolution!

Gay liberation groups saw themselves as one component of the decade's radicalism and regularly addressed the other issues that were mobilizing American youth. The Berkeley GLF, for instance, passed a resolution on the Vietnam War and the draft demanding that "all troops be brought home at once" and that homosexuals in the armed forces "be given Honorable discharges immediately." Its Los Angeles counterpart declared its "unity with and support for all oppressed minorities who fight for their freedom" and expressed its intention "to build a new, free and loving Gay counter-culture." Positions such as these made it relatively easy for previously closeted but already radicalized homosexuals and lesbians to join or form gay liberation organizations, and the new movement quickly won their allegiance.

Gay liberationists targeted the same institutions as homophile militants, but their disaffection from American society impelled them to use tactics that their predecessors would never have adopted. Bar raids and street arrests of gay men in New York City during August 1970 provoked a march by several thousand men and women from Times Square to Greenwich Village, where rioting broke out. Articles hostile to gays in

the *Village Voice* and in *Harper's* led to the occupation of publishers' offices. In San Francisco a demonstration against the *Examiner* erupted into a bloody confrontation with the police. Chicago Gay Liberation invaded the 1970 convention of the American Medical Association, while its counterpart in San Francisco disrupted the annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. At a session there on homosexuality a young bearded gay man danced around the auditorium in a red dress, while other homosexuals and lesbians scattered in the audience shouted "Genocide!" and "Torture!" during the reading of a paper on aversion therapy. Politicians campaigning for office found themselves hounded by scruffy gay militants who at any moment might race across the stage where they were speaking or jump in front of a television camera to demand that they speak out against the oppression of homosexuals. The confrontational tactics and flamboyant behavior thrust gay liberationists into the public spotlight. Although their actions may have alienated some homosexuals and lesbians, they inspired many others to join the movement's ranks.

As a political force, the New Left went into eclipse soon after gay liberation appeared on the scene, but the movement of lesbians and gay men continued to thrive throughout the 1970s. Two features of gay liberation accounted for its ability to avoid the decline that most of the other mass movements of the 1960s experienced. One was the new definition that post-Stonewall activists gave to "coming out," which doubled both as ends and means for young gay radicals. The second was the emergence of a strong lesbian liberation movement.

From its beginning, gay liberation transformed the meaning of "coming out." Previously coming out had signified the private decision to accept one's homosexual desires and to acknowledge one's sexual identity to other gay men and women. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, leaders of the homophile cause had in effect extended their coming out to the public sphere through their work

in the movement to counsel lesbians to follow their own desires rather than homophobic acts. This was a step taken by liberationists, coming out as a process that could offer an individual a new sexual identity at home, or symbolized that gay men consequently improved the "closet" through the fusion of the radicalism

Coming out for building a new individual was a liberation and angry women stepping out of the closet were propelled forward. Moreover, when they came out, they were on the line. They made themselves visible and acquired an identity in the movement in political line with lesbians and gay men that drew others out of the closet back in. Coming out with an army

A second feature of the Stonewall era was a strong lesbian liberation movement. Lesbians had the homophile movement simultaneous with gay liberation and they found in the movement a place where they were active and organized and experienced a sense of community that they found in the homophile movement.

in the movement. But only rarely did they counsel lesbians and homosexuals at large to follow their example, and when they did, homophile activists presented it as a selfless step taken for the benefit of others. Gay liberationists, on the other hand, recast coming out as a profoundly political act that could offer enormous personal benefits to an individual. The open avowal of one's sexual identity, whether at work, at school, at home, or before television cameras, symbolized the shedding of the self-hatred that gay men and women internalized, and consequently it promised an immediate improvement in one's life. To come out of the "closet" quintessentially expressed the fusion of the personal and the political that the radicalism of the late 1960s exalted.

Coming out also posed as the key strategy for building a movement. Its impact on an individual was often cathartic. The exhilaration and anger that surfaced when men and women stepped through the fear of discovery propelled them into political activity. Moreover, when lesbians and homosexuals came out, they crossed a critical dividing line. They relinquished their invisibility, made themselves vulnerable to attack, and acquired an investment in the success of the movement in a way that mere adherence to a political line could never accomplish. Visible lesbians and gay men also served as magnets that drew others to them. Furthermore, once out of the closet, they could not easily fade back in. Coming out provided gay liberation with an army of permanent enlistees.

A second critical feature of the post-Stonewall era was the appearance of a strong lesbian liberation movement. Lesbians had always been a tiny fraction of the homophile movement. But the almost simultaneous birth of women's liberation and gay liberation propelled large numbers of them into radical sexual politics. Lesbians were active in both early gay liberation groups and feminist organizations. Frustrated and angered by the chauvinism they experienced in gay groups and the hostility they found in the women's movement, many lesbians opted to create their own separatist

organizations. Groups such as Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies Collective in Washington, D.C., and Gay Women's Liberation in San Francisco carved out a distinctive lesbian-feminist politics. They too spoke in the radical phrases of the New Left, but with an accent on the special revolutionary role that lesbians filled because of their dual oppression as women and as homosexuals. Moreover, as other lesbians made their way into gay and women's groups, their encounters with the chauvinism of gay men and the hostility of heterosexual feminists provided lesbian liberation with ever more recruits.

Although gay liberation and women's liberation both contributed to the growth of a lesbian-feminist movement, the latter exerted a greater influence. The feminist movement offered the psychic space for many women to come to a self-definition as lesbian. Women's liberation was in its origins a separatist movement, with an ideology that defined men as the problem and with organizational forms from consciousness-raising groups to action-oriented collectives that placed a premium on female solidarity. As women explored their oppression together, it became easier to acknowledge their love for other women. The seeming contradiction between an ideology that focused criticism on men per se and the ties of heterosexual feminists to males often provoked a crisis of identity. Lesbian-feminists played upon this contradiction. "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion," wrote New York Radicalesbians in "The Woman-Identified Woman," one of the most influential essays of the sexual liberation movements:

Lesbian is the word, the label, the condition that holds women in line.... Lesbian is a label invented by the man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives, who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs.... As long as women's liberation tries to free women without facing the basic heterosexual structure that binds us in one-to-one relationships with our own oppressors, tremendous energies will continue to flow into trying to straighten

up each particular relationship with a man.... It is the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution.

Under these circumstances many heterosexual women reevaluated their sexuality and resolved the contradiction between politics and personal life by coming out as lesbians. Lesbian-feminist organizations were filled with women who came not from the urban subculture of lesbian bars but from the heterosexual world, with the women's liberation movement as a way station. As opponents of feminism were quick to charge, the women's movement was something of a "breeding ground" for lesbianism.

Besides the encouragement it provided for women to come out, women's liberation served lesbians – and gay men – in another way. The feminist movement continued to thrive during the 1970s. Its ideas permeated the country, its agenda worked itself into the political process, and it effected deep-seated changes in the lives of tens of millions of women and men. Feminism's attack upon traditional sex roles and the affirmation of a nonreproductive sexuality that was implicit in such demands as unrestricted access to abortion paved a smoother road for lesbians and homosexuals who were also challenging rigid male and female stereotypes and championing an eroticism that by its nature did not lead to procreation. Moreover, lesbians served as a bridge between the women's movement and gay liberation, at the very least guaranteeing that sectors of each remained amenable to the goals and perspectives of the other. Feminism helped to remove gay life and gay politics from the margins of American society.

By any standard of measurement, post-Stonewall gay liberation dwarfed its homophile predecessor. In June 1970 between 5,000 and 10,000 men and women commemorated the first anniversary of the riot with a march from Greenwich Village to Central Park. By the second half of the decade, Gay Freedom Day events were

occurring in dozens of cities, and total participation exceeded half a million individuals. The fifty homophile organizations that had existed in 1969 mushroomed into more than 800 only four years later; as the 1970s ended, the number reached into the thousands. In a relatively short time, gay liberation achieved the goal that had eluded homophile leaders for two decades – the active involvement of large numbers of homosexuals and lesbians in their own emancipation effort.

Numerical strength allowed the new breed of liberationists to compile a list of achievements that could only have elicited awe from homophile activists. In 1973 the American Psychiatric Association altered a position it had held for almost a century by removing homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. During the 1970s more than half the states repealed their sodomy laws, the Civil Service Commission eliminated its ban on the employment of lesbians and homosexuals, and several dozen municipalities passed antidiscrimination statutes. Politicians of national stature came out in favor of gay rights. Activists were invited to the White House to discuss their grievances, and in 1980 the Democratic party platform included a gay rights plank.

The stress gay liberation placed upon coming out also gave the movement leverage of another kind. Not only did men and women join groups that campaigned for equality from outside American institutions; they also came out within their professions, their communities, and other institutions to which they belonged. Gay Catholics, for instance, formed Dignity, and gay Episcopalians, Integrity. In some denominations gay men and women sought not only acceptance but also ordination as ministers. Military personnel announced their homosexuality and fought for the right to remain in the service. Lesbian and gay male academicians, school teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, psychologists, and others created caucuses in their professions to sensitize their peers to the needs of the gay community and to combat discrimination. Openly

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gay journalists and television reporters brought an insider's perspective to their coverage of gay-related news. The visibility of lesbians and gay men in so many varied settings helped make homosexuality seem less of a strange, threatening phenomenon and more like an integral part of the social fabric.

Finally, the post-Stonewall era witnessed a significant shift in the self-definition of gay men and women. As pressure from gay liberationists made police harassment the exception rather than the rule in many American cities, the gay subculture flourished as never before. The relative freedom from danger, along with the emphasis the movement placed on gay pride, led not only to an expansion of the bar world but also to the creation of a range of "community" institutions. Gay men and lesbians formed their own churches, health clinics, counseling services, social centers, professional associations, and amateur sports leagues. Male and female entrepreneurs built record companies, publishing houses,

travel agencies, and vacation resorts. Newspapers, magazines, literary journals, theater companies, and film collectives gave expression to a distinctive cultural experience. The subculture of homosexual men and women became less exclusively erotic. Gayness and lesbianism began to encompass an identity that for many included a wide array of private and public activities.

Stonewall thus marked a critical divide in the politics and consciousness of homosexuals and lesbians. A small, thinly spread reform effort suddenly grew into a large, grassroots movement for liberation. The quality of gay life in America was permanently altered as a furtive subculture moved aggressively into the open.

Reference

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