

Out of the Closet and into the Streets:
On the Flamboyance and Fervor of the Gay Liberation Movement

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HIST 1493: U.S. History Post-Civil War

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April 23, 2018

Ironically enough, mere moments after bemoaning today's young generation of LGBT men and women for being uneducated on the history of LGBT rights, drag performer Derrick Barry erroneously asserted that "people were killed" at the Stonewall Inn in 1969.¹ Amusing attempt to appear well-versed aside, Barry's dismay at the state of LGBT education is widely shared throughout the LGBT community. There is a sense that modern LGBT Americans are out of touch with their history, complacent in the advent of a post-*Obergefell v. Hodges* society where the most visible battleground for LGBT rights, same-sex marriage, is no longer in the public consciousness. With that in mind, young LGBT people are increasingly turning to formal institutions to educate them, but one particular chapter is all too often overlooked. As a result, this chapter, called the gay liberation movement, deserves a renewed consideration. What chiefly differentiated the gay liberation movement of the late sixties to late seventies from earlier iterations of gay rights efforts was the adoption of rhetoric and action that emphasized a proud embrace of the LGBT identity, which brought with it a new set of accomplishments as well as challenges.

Following the flashpoint that was the Stonewall riots, many gay men and women felt that the politics of the homophile movement were too mild; dissatisfied, this new generation of activists went on to write and adopt the radical rhetoric that defined the gay liberation movement. Before the events at the Stonewall Inn catalyzed the initiation of a new chapter in LGBT history, the most influential and popular organization of the preceding homophile movement was the Mattachine Society. So named for the medieval French "Société Mattachine," secret societies in which members often donned masks and performed rituals or dances in public spaces in protest of their oppression, the new American Mattachine Society was responsible for the majority of

¹ "'Spilling The Tea': The Queens Kiki on Gay Dating Apps & Lady Gaga's 'Born This Way'." Interview by Billboard. Youtube. June 27, 2017. (Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yBtji0rAFC8>).

American LGBT activism before the dawn of the gay liberation movement.² In the wake of the Stonewall riots, the New York chapter of the Mattachine Society met to determine a course of action in response. As a near perfect microcosm of the Society's prior decades of covert or accommodationist activism, an attending senior official suggested an "amicable and sweet" candlelight vigil, to which an angry member responded, "Sweet? Bullshit!"³

Shortly thereafter, the a new wave of LGBT groups began to form, including the Gay Liberation Front, the first of its kind to include the word "gay" in the name of the organization. Its name was similarly notable for its invocation of the National Liberation Front organizations in Vietnam and Argentina.⁴ Despite being a chaotically disorganized group, the Gay Liberation Front published their Gay Manifesto in 1971, declaring a radical new set of ideals to set the group apart from the more conformist homophile movement. The Gay Liberation Front and other groups like it took cues from other New Left movements of the day, building the manifesto around the notion of the feminist idea of the personal being political. As a result, the manifesto demanded change in terms of civil rights for gay people as well as a social revolution that would do away with the concepts of gender.⁵ In addition to demanding that gay men and women cease to be the targets of violence and discrimination for their sexualities, these groups demanded that couples be free to "hold hands and kiss in public" like their fellow straight citizens.⁶ These groups also applied the tactics of consciousness raising popularized by feminist groups in the years preceding Stonewall. Most radically, though, these new organizations called for a new

² Katz, Jonathan. *Gay American History : Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A. : a Documentary History*. New York : Meridian, 1992; Teal, Donn. *The Gay Militants*. New York, Stein and Day, 1971.

³ Katz, *Gay American History*.

⁴ Julia P. Stanley. "When We Say "Out of the Closets!"" *College English* 36, no. 3 (1974): 385-91. doi:10.2307/374858.

⁵ Gay Liberation Front. *A Gay Manifesto*. 1971.

⁶ Ibid.

concept of gay pride, something which had been notably absent from the prior homophile movement.⁷ Pointing out the faults in Mattachine Society era apologism, the Gay Liberation Front identified self-oppression as one of the biggest threats to the new movement, calling for the ushering in of an age of unapologetic embrace of their sexualities.⁸

Perhaps the most important way the new movement manifested its newfound notions of gay pride was the celebration of “gay liberation” parades, which eventually developed into the pride parades still celebrated today. Brenda Howard, a member of the Gay Liberation Front, is classically credited as the “Mother of Pride” for having organized the first pride parades in commemoration of the Stonewall riots. These parades were a massive departure from the exceptionally tame displays of the homophile era. Consider the pre-1969 Annual Reminder pickets organized by the Mattachine Society, where a strict dress code of suits and ties for men and dresses for women was enforced and participants were expressly required to refrain from any displays of same sex attraction.⁹ On the final Annual Reminder, held a mere week after the events at the Stonewall Inn crystalized a new era of LGBT rights activism, two lesbians broke ranks to hold hands on the steps of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.¹⁰ This prompted Mattachine Society organizer and picket veteran Frank Kameny to furiously attempt to separate the couple, deeming their act to be too far out of line with the image of “respectable and employable” homosexuals that the Society was trying to project.¹¹ By contrast, the parades following the Stonewall riots were far more assertive and dropped the facade that the Annual

⁷ Lekus, Ian. "The Long Sixties." *OAH Magazine of History* 20, no. 2 (2006): 32-38. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162031>.

⁸ Gay Liberation Front. *A Gay Manifesto*.

⁹ Lekus, Ian. "The Long Sixties"; Meeker, Martin. "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 78-116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3704790>.

¹⁰ Lekus, Ian. "The Long Sixties."

¹¹ Ibid.

Reminder pickets tried so desperately to maintain. As time went on, these parades gradually became more and more flamboyant and boisterous and eventually became the modern events that are held across the world today.

Parades weren't the only way that the new gay liberation movement asserted its presence in public spaces, though. Admittedly, while the Mattachine society did hold social gatherings and other purely recreational functions, these operations simply could not compare in scale or number to the new wave of gay activists eager to claim their place in the public world.¹² Throughout the late sixties and mid seventies, countless social events ranging from dances to lectures to support groups were advertised through fliers, posters, and newsletters.¹³ Often, newsletters like those published by the Milwaukee-based Gay Peoples' Union went as far as to advertise members' searches for fellow gays as roommates.¹⁴ This served as a tangible manifestation of a newfound desire for a stronger sense of identity and community, much like what was professed in the Gay Liberation Front's *Gay Manifesto*.¹⁵

Having adopted new rhetorical and tactical strategies, the gay liberation movement enjoyed its share of successes in changing the nation in accordance with their beliefs. One of the primary goals identified in the *Gay Manifesto* was the removal of homosexuality from psychological texts about mental illness such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*.¹⁶ This

¹² Ibid.; Meeker, Martin. "Behind the Mask of Respectability."

¹³ Gay Peoples Union. *1974 Annual Report*. December 31, 1974.

(<http://digioll.library.wisc.edu/WebZ/FETCH?sessionId=01-48683-1767884206:recno=2:resultset=2:format=F:next=html/nffull.html:bad=error/badfetch.html&entitycurrentcompno=5>. Accessed March 27 2018); Gay People's Union. *Take Heed!*, 1970.

(<http://digioll.library.wisc.edu/WebZ/FETCH?sessionId=01-40108-1957513746&recno=10&resultset=2&format=F&next=html/nffull.html&bad=error/badfetch.html&entitytoprecno=10&entitycurrecno=10&entityreturnTo=brief>. Accessed March 27, 2018).

¹⁴ Gay People's Union. *Take Heed!*, 1970.

¹⁵ Gay Liberation Front. *A Gay Manifesto*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

was accomplished surprisingly quickly with the publication of the DSM-2 in 1973.¹⁷ Likewise, there were significant advances in the civil rights offered to LGBT people, although the scope was certainly smaller than what was desired, and significant change was largely limited to a handful of metropolitan cities. For example, in 1977, Miami-Dade county passed legislation that banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation thanks to the work of grassroots activists.¹⁸ Later, again due in large part to the grassroots efforts of organizations like the Gay Peoples' Union based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin became the first state in America to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.¹⁹

Of course, no discussion of the successes of the gay liberation movement could be complete without mentioning the rise of Harvey Milk. Milk, who was an openly gay man after being discharged from the Navy, had thrice run unsuccessfully for various public offices in San Francisco where communities of gay men had settled. However, in 1977, Milk became the first openly gay person to be elected to a public office when he won a seat at the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.²⁰ Over the course of his political career, Milk successfully passed a city ordinance promoting gay rights, which was seen as a massive success for his constituents. Not long after Milk's election, the Democratic Party became the first mainstream political body to adopt a platform that advocated for LGBT rights when the 1980 Democratic National

¹⁷ Drescher, Jack. "Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality." *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565-75. (Accessed April 18, 2018. doi:10.3390/bs5040565).

¹⁸ Frank, Gillian. "'The Civil Rights of Parents': Race and Conservative Politics in Anita Bryant's Campaign against Gay Rights in 1970s Florida." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 1 (2013): 126-60. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23322037>.

¹⁹ Beller, Andrea H. "Occupational Segregation by Sex: Determinants and Changes." *The Journal of Human Resources* 17, no. 3 (1982): 371-92. doi:10.2307/145586.

²⁰ Cad. "Blows Struck - Gay Struggle Continues." *Off Our Backs* 9, no. 1 (1979): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25792872>.

Convention voted to incorporate a gay rights stance.²¹ Both candidates nominated by the Convention supported this new amendment, prompting many like lesbian San Francisco police commissioner Jo Daly to laud the accomplishment, calling it a “life-long dream come true.”²² Finally, it would be difficult to argue that the later successes of the modern gay rights movement would have ever been possible without the foundation laid by the gay liberation movement. It wasn’t until the 1970s that there was even talk of fighting for marriage equality for same sex couples, a battle that wouldn’t completely come to fruition for another four decades with the Supreme Court decision on *Obergefell v. Hodges*.²³

However, no movement is without its failures, and the gay liberation certainly faced new challenges as a result of their bravado. Of course, the earlier narrative of Harvey Milk’s success as a politician left out the important fact that he was assassinated after merely eleven months in office by fellow supervisor Dan White on November 27, 1978.²⁴ In addition, the movement’s embrace of “coming out” as a form of liberation wasn’t always executed ethically, and many gay men and women were publicly revealed as such without consent. A prime example of this issue is the case of Oliver Sipple. A former marine and veteran of the Vietnam war, Sipple was attending a gathering in San Francisco on September 22, 1975 where President Gerald Ford was to make an appearance. As Ford emerged, a woman in the crowd named Sara Jane Moore fired a shot at the President, narrowly missing her target. Sipple lunged at the would-be assassin and

²¹ Glover, Michael. “Carter Supports Gay Plank For Democratic Platform.” 1980. Gay Community News, June 21.

<http://search.proquest.com/genderwatch/docview/199398859/citation/65A323E99D242F9PQ/6>.

²² “Democrats Promise to End Anti-Gay Bias.” 1980. Body Politic, no. 66, September. 15–15. (<https://ezproxy.elon.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=qth&AN=10388090&site=ehost-live>).

²³ Eckholm, Erik. “The Same-Sex Couple Who Got a Marriage License in 1971.” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2015, New York Edition ed., sec. A.

²⁴ Cad. “Blows Struck - Gay Struggle Continues.”

disarmed her before she could take aim again, conceivably saving President Ford's life.²⁵

Naturally, the Sipple story made national headlines and news agencies were eager to gather more information on the rather quiet and private hero. Two days after headlines broke, Harvey Milk outed Sipple to the San Francisco Chronicle as a gay man and activist, claiming that the case was simply too good of an opportunity to refuse. Despite this being an attempt to break the stereotype of cowardly gay men by identifying a gay national hero, this revelation to the public was overwhelmingly poorly received. Sipple hadn't come out to his family and had no intention of doing so, and was subsequently disowned. After years of alcoholism and depression following his public outing, Oliver Sipple was found dead in his apartment by his landlord on February 2nd, 1989, having apparently drank himself to death.²⁶

Furthermore, the increased visibility for LGBT causes brought about by the gay liberation movement's consciousness raising efforts lit a fire beneath many conservatives, galvanizing a new generation of anti-LGBT activism. Returning to the example of the 1977 Miami-Dade anti-discrimination ordinance, this legislation directly led to the formation of the "Save Our Children" campaign spearheaded by Anita Jane Bryant.²⁷ Bryant, a popular singer through the 1950s and 60s, advocated against the 1977 ordinance on the premise that it represented an effort by gays to "brainwash children," and eventually managed to have the ordinance repealed.²⁸ This feverish rejection of the fledgling gay liberation movement was repeated across the nation, leading to the creation of countless pieces of legislation that either actively discriminated against LGBT people per se, or allowed for the public to do so at their discretion.

²⁵ Radiolab. "Oliver Sipple." September 22, 2017.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Cad. "In the Wake of Dade..." *Off Our Backs* 7, no. 7 (1977): 3.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25792468>.

²⁸ Bryant, Anita, and Bob Green. *At Any Cost*. Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1978.

The gay liberation movement was certainly unique in the progression of LGBT movements. It aligned itself with other New Left efforts, adopting new and radical ideas that would serve to inform its revolutionary new concept of gay pride. New flamboyant displays of sexual identity and protests led to a handful really quite exceptional accomplishments both during its era and beyond it. However, it was not without its flaws. Strong undertones of communism drove many potential supporters away that might have otherwise served to strengthen the movement. Likewise, much of the extreme rhetoric about social revolution and the deconstruction of gender roles alienated a significant number of gay men and women. As a result, the modern gay rights movement has largely abandoned the more extreme elements of these groups, leading to a movement that is much more focused on the civil rights of LGBT people instead. This isn't to say that the movement was a failure, though, rather that it was just a product of its time, brought up during the days of deep discontent with the compulsory uniformity of the 1950s. If anything, it was more of a success. Without this profound chapter in the history of LGBT rights, gay people today might still not be comfortable enough to hold their partner's hand.

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