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FROM SPECIAL INTEREST TO SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION?

The LGBT Movement in the United States

By Dawne Moon

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On the Verge of Liberation?

On November 6, 2012 voters in Maine, Maryland, and Washington made historic decisions: for the first time in U.S. history, a state-level popular vote decided in favor of same-sex marriage. The six states that had previously recognized these unions, along with the District of Columbia, had all done so through the courts or legislatures.

These popular votes are a promising sign of social change in the United States, as they reflect a decisive change in attitudes. Only a few years ago, anti-gay marriage initiatives could be counted on to turn out socially conservative voters. Today, opposition to gay marriage is another burden holding back an increasingly out-of-touch Republican Party. Polls show that a majority of Americans, including a supermajority of young people, now support gay marriage. Attitudes toward sexual difference in the United States have transformed in ways that seemed unthinkable until recently.

Of course, this change in attitudes did not come unaided. It is a change that has been fought for by a growing movement over several decades. The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) movement can claim great success in altering popular perceptions of sexual minorities and changing policies to protect their rights. While these victories remain patchwork and incomplete, more recent trends hold promises for an increasingly bright future.

But do they? Compared to the radical past of the LGBT movement, today's focus on marriage—some in the movement claim—seems to indicate that a former liberation movement has reached an age of accommodation. At least in public, marriage equality has seemingly become the defining issue of the LGBT movement. And while every progressive should support equal rights, what does the fact that it disproportionately benefits white, upper middle-class gays tell us about the ways and means? Does it mean that advocacy around marriage has occluded the concerns of queer people of color, poor and working-class gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, as well as transgendered people? Has an emphasis on securing distinct rights for LGBT people foreclosed possibilities for building socially transformative alliances with other oppressed groups?

In this study, Dawne Moon, Assistant Professor of Social and Cultural Sciences at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, explores these questions against the background of the historical evolution and trajectory of the LGBT movement. While there are precursors, the modern LGBT movement has its roots in post-war “homophile” organizations like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Moon shows how the movement made great strides during the 1960s and 1970s and how in the 1980s the AIDS crisis and right-wing backlash transformed the movement's perspectives and goals. Since then, we have come a long way, but the question remains: What should the politics of the LGBT movement look like in the 21st century?

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg
Co-Directors of New York Office, January 2013*

From Special Interest to Social Transformation?

The LGBT Movement in the United States

By Dawne Moon

The movement for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in the United States, or the LGBT movement, carries the legacy of sixty years of activist work to define homosexuals as an oppressed social minority akin to an ethnic group. Since its inception, the movement has embraced a tension between defining the interests of sexual minorities as the radical transformation of an oppressive society and defining those interests in terms of “gay rights,” which tend to be those rights that disproportionately benefit white, middle-class, gay men. Today, LGBT politics are mostly represented by large, national, single-issue organizations operating according to interest-group logic, seeking in-

dividual rights for gays, such as marriage and military participation. This political logic works in conjunction with the logic of “identity politics,” a political logic that seeks to abolish the stigma attached to homosexuality (or transgenderism) and inspire individuals to publically avow and take pride in membership. Still, more radical voices—with a more inclusive, intersectional view of the problems confronting LGBT people—can be found. At some point these voices may find an opportunity to influence the direction of LGBT politics or to form more broad-based leftist coalitions seeking to transform American society to make it more just for everyone.

The Emergence of Gay Identity

It is important to understand at the outset that the world has not always defined people by their sexual desires. Until the late nineteenth century, same-sex sexual activity did not define a distinct kind of person. The concept of homosexuality emerged in the 1860s, and the term “heterosexual” did not exist until 1880. As Michel Foucault put it, “The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species.”¹ While Foucault argued that the rise of medicine as a profession brought with it new

types of persons, U.S. historian John D’Emilio argues that medicine was not dictating the change but reflecting a change in reality precipitated by capitalism. He points out that when the U.S. colonies were agrarian societies, marriage was an economic arrangement. The family was an independent economic unit, where men and women depended on each other’s work for survival. In some colonies adults were required by law to live with a family—either their own or as a hired hand or maid in someone else’s. As capitalism gradually took hold in the United States, it restructured the economy and daily life; in capi-

¹ Foucault, Michel. 1979. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, p. 43.

talism, the family is not the basic economic unit, the individual is. Individuals work for a wage, and can thus support themselves apart from their parents or a spouse. As in Europe, marriage was redefined in the late nineteenth century, becoming primarily an affective unit rather than an economic one. As marriage became redefined as a source of nurturance and satisfaction, those whose primary attractions were to those of their same sex could start to ask why *their* relationships shouldn't be nurturing and satisfying as well.²

By the late nineteenth century, in large cities one could find people who defined themselves as sexually different from others and who felt something in common with others who shared their difference. Middle-class women could live together, have sexual relationships, and associate with other unmarried ladies like themselves, cloaked by Victorian notions of respectability.³ Men could stumble upon cruising grounds—such as New York's Battery Park or a YMCA—and find networks of others who shared their desires. In cities with large African American communities, drag balls were institutionalized sites for gay expression, frequented by homosexuals as well as heterosexuals.⁴ From the turn of the century into the 1920s, "fairies" and "mannish women" could be spotted in America's cities, objects of wonder or ridicule at what modern city life had to offer, but not targeted for persecution. When immigration and the Great Depression prompted crises in white, Protestant moral culture, laws were codified that could be used to curtail the freedoms of gay men and lesbians to associate in public.⁵

It was during World War II that the seeds of a self-conscious gay community first took root, as large numbers of youth left their rural homes to work in largely single-sex environments in cities and the military. There, those who identified as homosexuals could find others like themselves and, after the war, remain in cities where they could continue to live quietly gay lives, escaping heterosexuals' notice in part because of the widespread silence about homosexuality.⁶

By the 1950s, the lack of language available for discussing homosexuality made it difficult for many to identify themselves as homosexual, even as suspected homosexuals were subject to increasing persecution. Stigmatized by the church as sinful, the medical profession as sick, and the law as criminal, homosexuality was little talked about; the few discussions of it were hostile. It was hard to name in oneself and intensely dangerous to be identified with.

Medical stigmatization intensified in the political climate of the 1950s. At the same time, Senator Joseph McCarthy led the quest to weed Communists and homosexuals out of federal employment. At the height of McCarthyism, homosexuals actually outnumbered Communists in the ranks of those purged.⁷ Those suspected of being homosexuals could be fired by employers, who cited the medical establishment's designation of homosexuality as an illness to claim that homosexuals were too mentally unstable to be trusted. Still, the medical profession's increasing inquiries into sexual difference expanded the language available, creating what Foucault calls the possibility of a "reverse discourse," the idea that some of those defined as sick "homosexuals" would claim that label for themselves and use it as a rallying cry.

2 D'Emilio, John. 1981. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." In: *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. by Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson. New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 100-113.

3 D'Emilio, John. 1983. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 12.

4 Chauncey, George. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books.

5 Chauncey, George. 2004. *Why Marriage? The History Shaping Today's Debate Over Gay Equality*. New York: Basic Books.

6 D'Emilio 1981, op. cit.

7 Chauncey 2004, op. cit.

Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis

That cry began on the West Coast in 1951 with a small group of former Communist party members who first organized in Los Angeles as the Mattachine Society.⁸ At a time when associating as homosexuals opened people to the risk of arrest, exposure, unemployment, and ostracization—in some cities, bar and restaurant owners could be arrested for employing or serving homosexuals⁹—Harry Hay and a few friends started the Mattachine Society, modeling it on the secret-cell organization of the Communist party to protect participants' anonymity. Inspired, like many homosexuals of the day, by Donald Webster Cory's 1951 *The Homosexual in America*, which argued that homosexuals were a minority deserving of rights, Hay believed that the police harassment, employment discrimination, and social ostracization of homosexuals should be thought of not as just desserts for the sick and immoral, but as the persecution of a minority group that had its own laudable culture. Mattachine discussion groups focused on instilling in participants this new sense of themselves. *ONE* magazine, which was started in 1953 by many of the founders of Mattachine, became a valuable, nationwide forum for a homosexual minority to air its views to the public, including other gay men and lesbians through the 1960s.

The climate of the 1950s Red Scare made its mark on the homophile movement in 1953, when anti-communists within the Mattachine Society drove out its organizers. The organization then shifted from trying to instill a consciousness of homosexuals as a persecuted minority with legitimate political grievances to

making more individualist interventions, such as helping individuals with problems such as legal fees for those caught by entrapment or bar raids, and seeking out heterosexual allies who could advocate for greater tolerance of homosexuals in society. Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon founded the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco in 1955 as a lesbian organization focused on gaining mainstream respectability. This organization published its own newsletter, *The Ladder*, and courted the support of heterosexual legal and medical professionals. When sociologist Howard Becker met with DOB members in 1965, he wrote in *The Nation* of his initial amusement at their appearance, saying

the group looked like a middle-class women's club having a meeting to decide how to run the next charity bazaar [...]. I stopped smiling when I realized the aggressiveness and courage it took to identify oneself publicly as the officer of a Lesbian organization and the risk these women were taking in doing so.¹⁰

These organizations, composing what they called the homophile movement, opened chapters around the country. Throughout the 1960s, they continued to offer those homosexuals who found them the hope of tolerance and comfort in the knowledge that there were others like themselves. At the same time, it was largely a white, middle-class movement. Working-class homosexuals tended to congregate in bars and house parties rather than spend their spare time listening to lectures, and the cultivation of middle-class respectability made working-class styles and bar culture “undesirable” to organizers.

Homophile organizations beseeched respectable professionals for support, even giving audience to professionals who described them

8 D'Emilio 1983, op. cit., pp. 57-91. Some organizations of homosexuals existed earlier, but D'Emilio marks the founding of the Mattachine Society as “the start of the unbroken history of homosexual and lesbian organizing.” See Katz, Jonathan Ned. 1976. *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* New York: T.Y. Crowell.

9 Chauncey 2004, op. cit.

10 Quoted in D'Emilio 1983, op. cit., p. 143.

as pathological. In the mid-to late 1960s, a more radical approach started to gain footing. Inspired by the student and civil rights movements, a generation of younger homosexuals loudly repudiated the modest, reform goals of the homophile movement as self-defeating and self-hating. Demonstrations, pickets, and demands for media accountability entered the repertoire, and heterosexual allies started to bring attention to the injustices homosexuals endured at the hands of police. On the East Coast, there were splits in both the Mattachine society and the Daughters of Bilitis over tactics and goals.

It was once again starting to make sense to think of gay men and lesbians as an unjustly treated minority akin to an ethnic group, a metaphor that holds until this day. To the consternation of some older homophile group members, militants within eastern homophile groups—including Franklin Kameny of Washington’s Mattachine, Randy Wicker of the New York Mattachine, and Barbara Gittings of the New York Daughters of Bilitis—sought not “understanding” but equality. Selectively inspired by the civil rights movement, they organized pickets and public rallies around the country. They challenged police harassment and entrapment rather than protecting their anonymity. They convinced the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to treat legal abuses of homosexuals as rights violations and to challenge them in court, and they won. They disputed the authority of the medical profession to diagnose gays as sick, and they publicized their views on the radio and in venues such as *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Village Voice*, and *Harper’s*.¹¹

The movement was beginning to take the form that persists to this day, with national organizations, heterosexual allies, supportive religious institutions, and a focus on fostering social networks that can build political power. In the

mid-sixties, something like a national movement was forming, with organizations starting up in cities such as Kansas City, Seattle, and Chicago. At the 1968 North American Conference of Homophile Organizations (NACHO), delegates echoed the “Black is Beautiful” slogan of the Black Power movement by endorsing a slogan of “Gay is Good,” in what D’Emilio calls “A symbolic affirmation that would have been unthinkable a decade earlier.”¹²

In 1964, the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, founded by clergy ministering to the homeless youths, transgender sex workers, and street hustlers of San Francisco’s Tenderloin District, began to witness first-hand the police harassment of gays that had gone unchecked for decades, publicized it, and called for an end to it. Police and the public found it harder to dismiss the testimony of heterosexual clergy than it had been to dismiss the complaints of those they deemed degenerate. It was at this time that some Protestant churches made official statements against anti-gay discrimination, and in 1968 the Reverend Troy Perry founded the gay-affirming Metropolitan Community Church, which grew quickly as gays first in Los Angeles and then elsewhere learned of a space where they could commune with God, learning that God accepted them as gay and blessed their relationships.

Organizers in the late 1960s recognized bars as legitimate sites of the gay and lesbian subcultures they wished to develop and foster; the Society for Individual Rights (SIR) formed in San Francisco in 1964 and immediately drew huge numbers of gay members because, unlike other homophile organizations, it was willing to support gays in any activity they wished: brunches, hikes, parties, and dances, as well as more staid discussion groups and political advocacy. In these shifts, homophile activists laid the framework and created the consciousness necessary for identity politics.

11 D’Emilio 1983, op. cit., pp. 149-175.

12 Ibid., pp. 198-199.

Stonewall Riots and Gay Liberation

On June 27, 1969, a routine bar raid at New York's Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village provoked not the usual compliance but a violent reaction, with patrons blockading police into the bar, throwing bottles and furniture, and rioting again the following two nights. In a Mattachine newsletter, it was referred to as "The hair-pin drop heard 'round the world," echoing the American Revolution's "shot heard 'round the world" and the gay colloquialism for dropping subtle cues about one's homosexuality.¹³ Homophiles had distanced themselves from both the homosexual bar scene and gender transgressors, seeing them as not in keeping with the respectable image they had hoped would garner them some sympathy. Some in the New Left had derided the bars as sites of self-loathing and sexual objectification, with one activist referring to them as "walk-in closets." It was thus ironic that the patrons of this bar, largely working-class gay men, lesbians, and transgender people of color, made up the rebellious crowds that the gay movement now commemorates annually in Pride Parades around the country and credits with having launched the modern LGBT movement.¹⁴ New Left organizers flocked to the scene after the first night.

For two years after the 1969 Stonewall Riots, the Gay Liberation Front served as the voice of the gay New Left, advocating for an end to all oppression and for gay people to support demands for civil rights, socialism, feminism, and the end of imperialism. The radicals of the New Left envisioned a truly just society and saw sex-

ual liberation *for everyone* as part of this better world. They advocated consciousness-raising and tried to model their own lives on their ideals. They worked in tension with other gays, including older homophiles, who saw such a broad agenda as counterproductive, especially given that gays had been derided as "faggots" and forced to the back of marching crowds in leftist demonstrations. Novel tactics such as "zaps" inspired excitement and drew media attention to the pro-gay perspective, as when activists, identifying themselves as homosexuals, set up a table and gave coffee and doughnuts to the staff of *Harper's* in response to the editors' refusal to let the Gay Activists Alliance rebut an anti-gay article published in the magazine.¹⁵

Elizabeth Armstrong argues that, in fact, the gay movement flourished because, in addition to briefly having a place for the New Left's wide-ranging goals for social justice, it also developed identity logic—the logic that political change could only come by changing the cultural meanings around homosexuality—and continued to pursue decades-old interest-group politics—seeking legal recognition and rights for individuals. When the New Left, which embraced practical realities of sexism, racism, and anti-gay bigotry that belied their ideals, dissolved by 1971, the gay movement's exciting new political logic of identity politics remained, fostering gay and lesbian identification to an unprecedented extent.

One of the most significant legacies of Gay Liberation was a change in the meaning of "coming out." Throughout the twentieth century prior to this, "coming out" had been a campy gay term for being introduced to the local gay

¹³ Quoted in D'Emilio 1983, op. cit., p. 232.

¹⁴ Historian Susan Stryker argues that the modern gay movement actually began in 1966, when the Council for Religion and the Homosexual formed and when a similar rebellion of transgender sex workers occurred at Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco's Tenderloin district. Stryker, Susan, and Jim Van Buskirk. 1996. *Gay by the Bay: A history of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area*. San Francisco: Chronicle.

¹⁵ Armstrong, Elizabeth. 2002. *Forging Gay Identities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 74, 94.

world, a parodic appropriation of the elite's rite of passage into womanhood.¹⁶ Inspired by the 1960s focus on personal authenticity, "coming out of the closet" came to mean coming out to *heterosexual* society, being open about one's homosexuality to *everyone*. Harry Hay had envisioned a similar thing twenty years prior, but it was not until later—with the widespread focus on personal authenticity and the legal gains of the 1960s—that the politics of gay pride and coming out could really take root.¹⁷ Armstrong points out that unlike older homophiles, the young radicals of the early 1970s, who rejected the staid normalcy of their parents' generation, had little to lose by coming out to members of heterosexual society. Many had already rejected their parents' lifestyles as conformist and had little fear of their family's own rejection of them; they were unmoved by the prospect of not being able to secure a government job; and many saw going to jail for expressing themselves as a mark of honor. The forces that had kept so many living in secrecy in the 1950s and 1960s simply didn't apply to them.¹⁸

Chauncey argues that the politics of coming out was inspired in part by black youths' demonstrations of willingness to disrupt "the patterns of discretion and deference that had served to reinforce" white supremacy. Coming out became a revolutionary act, "a risky act of witness,"¹⁹ rejecting the conformity of the fifties and sixties, transforming one's own life, and building a movement at the same time. Once a person publicly came out, it would be difficult to go back *in*. She or he became invested in the success of the movement "in a way that mere adherence to a political line could never accomplish."²⁰ And as became evident during the anti-gay backlash, coming out as gay or lesbian to one's heterosexual friends, relatives, and co-

workers made it less likely that they would support anti-gay political initiatives.

Coming out was also influenced by the "ethnic revivals" of the 1970s. Chauncey writes,

*in proclaiming and even cultivating their sense of difference from the national norm, gay people followed the lead of African-Americans, Chicanos, Jews, Italians, and others who were also embracing difference they had once downplayed or concealed.*²¹

Steven Epstein has argued that the "ethnic" model makes sense of gay people's experience in familiar terms. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, gay people had been stigmatized as sick, criminal, and sinful. While the "sickness" label suggests that homosexuality is wrong but "not their fault," the labels of *crime* and *sin* compound the opprobrium with an element of choice and culpability. In the 1970s, inspired by the philosophical and sociological concept of social constructionism, feminists and gay and lesbian liberationists of the New Left suggested that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual could be a choice—and a good one at that. They drew from psychoanalytic theory to argue that *all* people had within them the potential to be heterosexual, homosexual, or in between. But few gay men and lesbians felt that they had any choice about their sexual preferences, and many had tried to choose heterosexuality to no avail.²² Epstein argues that the concept of ethnicity provided a language for people who did not feel that they

16 Chauncey 1994, op. cit.

17 It was at this time that the term "gay" replaced the medical classification of "homosexual" in the vernacular.

18 Armstrong 2002, op. cit., pp. 67-73.

19 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 32-33.

20 D'Emilio 1983, op. cit., p. 235.

21 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

22 Today, while social constructionism is supported by a mountain of sociological, anthropological, and historical evidence, the most convincing scientific views of gender and sexuality modify it slightly and show that "nature vs. nurture" is a false dichotomy, that our brains and bodies are shaped by social life and our social categories are partly selected in response to our bodies. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, 2000. *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books; Jenkins, W. J. 2010. "Can anyone tell my why I'm gay? What research suggests regarding the origins of sexual orientation." *North American Journal of Psychology*, 12, pp. 279-296. Epstein, Steven. 1987. "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity: The Limits of Social Constructionism." *Socialist Review* 17 (3-4), pp. 9-54.

had a choice but to be homosexual, but *did* have a choice about how they would express and feel about their difference from the norm. In 1951, *The Homosexual in America* had suggested that homosexuals were a minority group, but it was the ethnic revivals of the 1970s that allowed that way of thinking about sexual orientation to become common sense.

In the early 1970s, Gay Liberation had notable successes: ending police harassment and entrapment on the scale they had previously been carried out, getting the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness and the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association to follow suit shortly thereafter; inspiring religious organizations to advocate non-discrimination and open their facilities to gay groups; and ending some forms of employment discrimination. In 1972 East Lansing, Michigan, passed the first municipal gay rights ordinance in the country, followed with little controversy by a handful of other university towns and liberal cities.²³ In 1977, the country's first openly gay official, Harvey Milk, was elected to San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, and national politicians came out in favor of gay rights as interest-group and identity politics took over the movement. By 1980, half of the states had repealed sodomy laws that, in spite of various wordings and prohibitions, had been used almost exclusively to prosecute homosexuals. All

of these gains had been made possible by the plodding work of the homophile movement in the 1950s and '60s.

The logic of identity politics was propelled by the idea of unity within diversity displayed in pride parades, commemorations of Stonewall enacted around the country in late June every year. Pride parades have traditionally, especially in large cities, consisted of contingents from every gay organization, politician, and business in the region, effectively showing the diversity within the movement: gay librarians, lesbian dog-owners, gay joggers, choruses, churches, and bankers. Armstrong points out that these two logics do not always work well together, but gay organizers worked to make them coalesce—interest politics were bolstered by the identity logic's fostering of gay pride, and gay pride was fostered by interest-group politics' quest for gay rights. As some activists argued, gays of any political persuasion could get behind this program.²⁴ While these two logics have come to define the LGBT politics of the past thirty or so years, the social justice logic of Gay Liberation has always had voices in the movement as well. Political radicalism (and to a far lesser extent, political conservatism) was embraced as part of the movement's diversity, though for many leftists, the LGBT movement is only successful to the extent that it allows these impulses to be expressed in dynamic tension.

The Late 1970s and the Rise of the Religious Right

The rapid and highly visible successes of the gay movement in the 1970s were eventually met with backlash. As Chauncey argues, the successes of Gay Liberation were balanced out by several areas of lack: the movement remained

concentrated in certain cities and regions and had not yet entered the national consciousness of political and public debate. He points out that coming out made gay people familiar to many heterosexuals, but it also horrified others, for

²³ Chauncey 2004, op. cit., p. 39; D'Emilio 1983, op. cit., p. 238.

²⁴ Armstrong 2002, op. cit., pp. 102-110.

whom the visibility of gay men and lesbians inspired a backlash politics of “traditional family values.”²⁵

The Religious Right first entered the political scene when voters in Dade County, Florida, passed an ordinance banning anti-gay discrimination in 1977. Anita Bryant, a former Miss America who had become a television spokesperson for the Florida orange growers association, took the lead in challenging Dade County’s ordinance with virulently homophobic suggestions that gays were child molesters, calling her vitriolic repeal movement “Save Our Children.” She succeeded, and other cities followed suit. An even more stringent measure, the Briggs Initiative, was placed on the state ballot in California, threatening to ban gay men and lesbians from employment in public schools and prohibit any teacher, gay or straight, from “advocating homosexuality.” It was defeated, thanks to savvy political organizing by gay movement leaders like Harvey Milk. Shortly after the victory, Milk was assassinated by fellow supervisor Dan White; the following spring, when White was found guilty of manslaughter rather than murder, the city erupted in violence.

It was in this climate that the gay movement, which was beginning to include lesbians in organizational names, first became a national movement. Although the National Gay Task Force had been formed in 1973, it focused on state and local level struggles. Milk had advocated at San Francisco’s 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade for a national March on Washington, and his assassination seems to have inspired even some of those who had been lukewarm about the idea before to carry it out. Highly publicized anti-gay campaigns like Save Our Children and the Briggs Initiative led activists to see the struggle for rights as a national one. Some saw a national march a way to build that movement by, for instance, producing a mailing list and a nationally mobilizable network of activists. The

1979 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, like the three subsequent national marches, involved a great deal of conflict and negotiation among organizers but took place in October 1979, with 80,000 marchers making five demands: passage of a comprehensive gay/lesbian rights bill in Congress; a presidential order banning discrimination based on sexual orientation in federal hiring; the repeal of all anti-lesbian/gay laws; ending discrimination in custody cases with gay or lesbian parents; and the protection of gay and lesbian youth from discrimination.²⁶

March organizers, after some struggle, committed themselves to gender parity and anti-racism, but that struggle had been significant. Throughout the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s, the movement had been dominated by middle-class, white, gay men. Early on, lesbians who tried to work within “gay” organizations found themselves asked to make coffee and copies and to defer to men. White gay men saw their issues as universal to all gays, and others’ as particular to themselves. For instance, gay men’s entrapment by police for public sex, not something many lesbians experienced, was a major focus of gay organizing for thirty years and considered a universal gay issue; however, when lesbians lost custody of their children, it was due to their sexual orientation, but men did not see this as a “gay issue.” Throughout the seventies, lesbians had tended to focus their energies on separate organizing with lesbian-feminist goals.

Lesbians of color grew critical of white lesbians’ assumptions that white women’s issues could be universalized to all women, much the way white lesbians criticized white male organizers’ assumptions that men’s claims were universal. The notion that women of color could afford to reject their families—and men of color—the way white women rejected theirs simply did not

²⁵ Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 39, 35.

²⁶ Ghaziani, Amin. 2008. *The Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 59.

speak to the experience of women of color who needed protection from America's racism. They developed a sophisticated critique of feminism and identity politics and an important body of social theorizing and activism that continues to grow to this day. It was not until the 1980s that gay men of color found visible forums for their critiques as well. Armstrong argues that precisely because gay politics has always claimed to embrace the diversity of those persecuted for their sexual orientation, it has been open to criticism for being too exclusive, claiming to represent those that movement organizers actually ignored. When gay institutions claim to represent all of those who are persecuted for their sexuality, but perpetuate the silencing, disenfranchisement of, or discrimination against people of color (rampant in gay bars, as well as community and political organizations), they split the movement, shut out potential members and allies, and perpetuate white supremacy.²⁷

In Armstrong's analysis, the gay movement grew tremendously in the 1970s by putting forth a way to have unity within diversity; a "gay

plus one" formulation that was displayed in pride parades around the country, as gay people marched with gay choruses, lesbian librarians, gay and lesbian swimmers, dog owners, hikers, or Republicans. White men in the movement accepted people of color as part of that diversity, so long as they were content to think of their race or ethnicity as no more significant than a hobby. She also points out that the logic of gay identity politics, paradoxically, made other identities more salient too, and made being "closeted" about them equally undesirable. Critiques of the definition of "gay" were inevitable.²⁸ Periodically, the movement experiences flare-ups between advocates for single-issue organizing for "gay rights" and broad coalition organizing to end racism, sexism, capitalism, colonialism, and other forms of systematic oppression. These critiques point to the essentially correct analysis of the New Left, that systems of domination are interrelated and that social justice depends on coalition politics. That strain of political thought—generative as it has been—has not matched the political success of the interest-group and identity politics that has come to dominate the LGBT movement.

The 1980s: Backlash, AIDS, and the Lesbian Baby Boom

To understand the current state of the LGBT movement in the United States, we need to understand how it came to be nearly monopolized by the drive for the rights of same-sex couples to marry, a goal that was anathema to the New Left and unthinkable to many others, who through the 1970s saw marriage as either an institution of women's oppression, a site for state and religious regulation of sexuality, or both. In Chauncey's compelling analysis, the answer to that puzzle hinges on three factors from the 1980s that dramatically revealed the level of vulnerability still faced by lesbians and gay men:

the Religious Right's targeting of homosexuals, of which we have seen the beginnings; AIDS; and the lesbian baby boom. These, plus two changes in heterosexual society—the changing meaning of marriage and the increased visibility of ordinary gay men and lesbians—led same-sex marriage to ascend to the top of the LGBT movement's agenda in the 1990s and to virtually monopolize it in the 2000s.

The Religious Right continued to grow. With the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980, the Right was empowered to attack

²⁷ Armstrong 2002, op. cit., pp. 137-147.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 102-106, 137-147.

not only gay rights and visibility in the political landscape, but abortion rights, feminism, and some of the gains of the Civil Rights movement, such as Affirmative Action. Right-wing leaders capitalized on AIDS with fear-mongering and the occasional gleeful display of *schadenfreude*, such as Pat Buchanan's 1983 remark in the *Washington Times*: "The poor homosexuals; they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution." The Reagan administration gave the pandemic little attention or priority because of the stigmatized populations it affected, and Reagan himself did not even address AIDS until 1987, six years and 20,000 deaths into the crisis.

AIDS was the defining feature of lesbian, bisexual, and gay life in the 1980s. In the first few years, before the virus was isolated, no one knew where it came from or why it was attacking gay men in such huge numbers. At first, distrust of the government slowed the gay community's response to the crisis and saw gay people who were not infected distancing themselves from those who were. Once that period passed, however, the gay identity movement, which in the 1970s had amassed huge institutional resources and experience, responded with multiple legal, health, and home care services for the sick and dying and with preventative guidelines for safer sex. People lost countless friends, and gay men and lesbians were united, in part because the government's inaction was taken as a sign of how little regard it had for any gay person's life, in part because lesbians had experience in intervening in the medical establishment through the women's health movement, and in part because the deaths of so many young men created a void in leadership that lesbians could fill.

Meanwhile, in 1986 respected conservative William F. Buckley, writing in the *New York Times*, called for tattooing people with AIDS with their seropositivity status, and others advocated the quarantine of people with AIDS. Thousands of

gay men died every year; people lost entire circles of friends, attending funeral after funeral for loved ones, and the media reported on it in pathologizing and demonizing terms that made gay people seem like perpetrators rather than victims. Meanwhile, the federal government's inaction created the impression among gay men and lesbians that officials, and perhaps the American public, would not be bothered if they all just died.

Five years into the crisis, the Supreme Court compounded the malign neglect of the president and Congress:

The rapid expansion of existing organizations and the creation of new ones were extraordinary, but the very need for them reflected the government's refusal to take a "homosexual disease" seriously, and reinforced the gay community's recognition that the "general public" did not care about the health crisis surging through their community. The growing anger many gay people felt erupted in 1986, when the Supreme Court upheld the nation's [remaining] sodomy laws in Bowers v. Hardwick, using language that belittled the very idea that homosexuals had "a fundamental right [...] to engage in sodomy" as "facetious." The ruling put a roadblock in the way of gay rights litigation and emboldened the opponents of gay rights. Many lower courts interpreted the ruling to mean that discrimination against homosexuals was constitutionally permissible. Just as important, the sodomy laws' criminalization of homosexual activity served the larger ideological purpose of criminalizing all lesbians and gay men. Bowers gave the opponents of gay rights carte blanche to use this imputation of criminality to justify everything from excluding gays from the military to removing children from the homes of lesbian mothers. The APA [American Psychological Association] had stopped calling homosexuals mentally ill in 1973; but in 1986, the Supreme Court effectively announced that they could still be called criminals.²⁹

Deborah Gould argues that the *Bowers* decision provoked the revival of gay and lesbian militancy, expressed in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP, which revived the direct ac-

29 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 42-3.

tion “zap” tactics of the sixties and used slick design styles to make sharp visual critiques of the homophobia at the heart of government inaction.³⁰ But it was not only ACT-UP members who felt rage by that point. Rage was the primary emotion expressed in the 1987 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, where an estimated 200,000-650,000 people filled the streets, participating in a mass wedding, displaying the Names Project’s quilt commemorating those who had died of AIDS on the National Mall, and holding a large-scale civil disobedience action at the Supreme Court to protest the *Bowers* decision.

AIDS was devastating to the community, and it also made clear just how vulnerable gay men and lesbians were by law. Partners who had shared a life with dying men for years and nursed them through their illness became homeless in cases where the dead partner’s name was the only one on the title or lease of their home. Hostile biological families living far away, some of whom did not even know their sons were gay, were confronted at once with the facts of their son’s gayness and his dying from AIDS. Even in cases where men’s wishes had been legally contracted, their birth families could successfully claim in court that the partner had perverted their son and unduly influenced his decisions, leaving the partners with nothing. People with AIDS whose jobs provided health insurance lost it when they grew too sick to work, and even if they had partners with insurance, it didn’t cover them. Partners were not granted family leave to care for their dying loved ones, as spouses would have been. A generation of young people, who had never had a reason to think about these issues, was suddenly faced with the complications created by a social safety net that allocates benefits on the basis of employment and marriage rather than citizenship or residency. And as orga-

nized pressure from activists made the media more sympathetic—the *New York Times* started using the word “gay” in 1987 and others soon followed suit—straight America began to see these injustices.

In addition to the rise of the Religious Right and the advent of AIDS, what became known as the lesbian baby boom also demonstrated the vulnerability of gay men and lesbians in the law. Inspired by the decades of identity politics that made being lesbian something that did not have to be hidden, lesbians in the 1980s started having children through donor insemination or adoption as lesbians, rather than only from previous relationships with men. But parental rights in the United States are also conferred by marriage in many cases. The media reported on cases where children, traumatized by the death of one mother, were taken from the custody of their surviving parent by hostile grandparents. Again, the tangible consequences of not being able to marry were starting to become more obvious to increasingly large segments of society, even as other segments were mobilized to prevent gay men and lesbians from being protected by the law.

Throughout this time, the growing right-wing assault on gays and lesbians prompted a huge wave of coming out, including among lesbians and gay men who did not join political organizations. This shift’s proportions can be seen in polling data: in 1985, only a quarter of Americans reported that someone they knew had personally told them that they were gay. Fifteen years later the number of people who knew someone openly gay had tripled to three-quarters of the population. The number of Americans who reported having a gay friend or close acquaintance increased from 22 percent in 1985 to 43 percent in 1994 and rose to 56 percent in 2000; the national membership of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) grew tremendously.³¹

30 Gould, Deborah B. 2009. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT-UP’s Fight Against AIDS*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 122-145.

31 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

ACT-UP and the Queer Critique

These were successes of a movement dominated by interest-group and identity politics that had given up its pursuit of wide scale social transformation with the demise of the New Left. Among all of this rights-seeking, interest-group work, queer critiques were born.

It began with ACT-UP. From 1987 to 1993, ACT-UP members from chapters around the country engaged in direct-action demonstrations, disrupting business as usual at places targeted for their inaction over AIDS—federal agencies, pharmaceutical companies, and Wall Street—to insist that people with AIDS mattered and that AIDS was a national health crisis. Meetings were large, sometimes numbering in the hundreds in New York, and procedurally democratic. Members worked by consensus in affinity groups. This democratic style had space for diversity in analyses and approaches because members trusted each other and were able to learn from each other.

ACT-UP gave *both* single-issue and social justice politics a militant and highly audible voice. Their successes made it possible for some ACT-UP members to meet with federal officials to streamline the research and approval processes to “get drugs into bodies.” These tended to be middle-class, white gay men, who could secure an audience with people much like them in the government. Others, largely white women and people of color, advocated for education and prevention, tactics that stood to help women, the poor, and people of color (and everyone in the overlaps among those categories), who were increasingly contracting HIV in ways that were medically different from white men and likely to be too poor to afford the latest treatments anyway. These groups were thus more likely to be helped not by streamlining the federal drug testing bureaucracy, but by prevention and education.³²

ACT-UP generated a queer critique. It was an AIDS organization rather than a lesbian and gay organization, but its cultural intervention tactics highlighted the deep hatred of homosexuality in American society that made the tragic deaths of mostly gay men (along with intravenous drug users, Haitians, and later people of color more generally) seem acceptable to many Americans. Queer theory and queer activism were two allied but separate ways of critiquing anti-gay culture as a political ideology, embracing the term “queer” as an opposite to what scholars would eventually call “heteronormativity,” the ubiquitous assumption that heterosexuality is timeless, natural, and universal—when evidence suggests that it is actually constructed through a suppression of those feelings, actions, and people deemed “queer.”

Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics had long been studying homosexuality and gay people. Sociologists—with their interests both in how things that seem natural are often in fact produced by society, and in how society defines certain people as “deviant” and then punishes them—had included homosexuals in their studies, and historians soon followed suit, documenting the lives of gay men and lesbians who had been obscured by heterosexist bias.³³ Anthropologists examined the wide range of practices considered normal in various societies, making clear that Euro-American culture’s dominant sexual norms and kinship patterns were by no

32 Gould 2009, op. cit., pp. 328-394.

33 In sociology, see, for instance, Mary McIntosh. 1968. “The Homosexual Role.” *Social Problems* 16 (2): 182-192; Laud Humphreys. 1970. *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*, Duckworth. In history, see, for instance, John Boswell. 1980. *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*, University of Chicago Press; as well as Katz 1976, op. cit., and D’Emilio 1983, op. cit.

means universal or “natural.”³⁴ But these studies were often isolated, and the scholars who wrote them were often denied institutional positions and recognition. Beginning in the late 1980s with work by scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler, theorists began to point to the heterosexist bias throughout European and North American understandings of knowledge and personhood as a whole.

What emerged was queer theory, an intellectual movement whose contributors share the assumption that sexual categories are socially constructed in arbitrary, binary terms that create oppressive realities for some and power for others. Queer theory and LGBT studies, though still stigmatized in academia, have grown tremendously in the past two decades, keeping critiques of identity politics alive that challenge the dominance of white, middle-class, cisgendered³⁵ gays and lesbians in the movement and critiquing the heteronormativity of society more broadly.

Queer activism saw a much more dramatic rise and fall. Spinning off from ACT-UP’s direct action tactics but directly targeting homophobia, Queer Nation was founded in New York in 1990, and groups bearing the name quickly cropped up in cities all around the country. Queer Nation engaged in “in-your-face” politics of queer visibility by altering billboards, zapping live television broadcasts, staging kiss-ins in malls, and otherwise highlighting the homoeroticism lurking just beneath the surface in normative society.

In the end, ACT-UP was confronted by diminishing resources that led its different voices to compete where they used to cooperate. Over-

simplified as “white men vs. everyone else,” these divides can be more accurately described as between interest-group politics and a politics of social transformation. Queer Nation confronted similar struggles as ACT-UP, but Queer Nation’s existence was complicated by confusion about its goals. Critics have seen Queer Nation in particular as bringing about its own demise by not deciding whether it rejected the logic of identity politics—that there is a minority for which gay identity politics speaks—or affirming a new identity: the queer.³⁶ In a later analysis, Joshua Gamson articulated the queer critique perhaps more clearly than Queer Nation ever did, saying:

The gay and lesbian civil-rights strategy, for all its gains, does little to attack the political culture that itself makes the denial of and struggle for civil rights necessary and possible... [It does not] challenge the system of meanings that underlie the political oppression: the division of the world into man/woman and gay/straight. On the contrary, [it] ratifies] and reinforce[s] these categories.³⁷

In other words, the cultural logic that makes identity politics possible also holds the seeds of its own critique: the fact that the driving force behind the movement is a group’s stigmatization by the dominant society.

As Gamson says, “Interest group politics on the ethnic model is, quite simply but not without contradictory effects, how the American socio-political environment is structured.”³⁸ By 1993, both ACT-UP and Queer Nation were pretty much defunct. The moment for direct action and militancy seemed to have passed.

34 See, for instance, Gayle Rubin. 1975. “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in: Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press, pp. 157-210.

35 Not transgendered; expressing the sex category that was assigned to one at birth.

36 Armstrong 2002, op. cit., p. 180.

37 Gamson, Joshua. 1996. “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma.” In: *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. by Steven Seidman. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 395-420, here p. 408.

38 Ibid., p. 409.

The 1990s: The Institutional Politics of an Established Minority

In the 1990s, the institutional face of power took center stage in the LGBT movement (and bisexuals and transgender people began to secure at least token recognition that anti-homosexual actions and attitudes affected them as well, hence the increasing use of the “LGBT” moniker). Lesbian and gay political clout and cultural visibility were growing. Gay neighborhoods appeared all over the country, and people felt comfortable being outside those neighborhoods. The LGBT movement started making great strides, though right-wing backlash continued as well.

Bill Clinton openly courted the gay vote as he successfully campaigned for the Presidency in 1992. He failed to secure the sweeping health care reform he had promised or to end the military’s ban (settling instead for the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy), but he succeeded in banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in federal hiring and security clearances and appointed more than 150 openly gay officials to his administration, including an ambassador. News media were painting increasingly sympathetic portraits of lesbians and gay men and showing the sometimes heart-wrenching effects of discrimination. Workplaces were beginning to offer insurance to employees’ same-sex domestic partners. Gay characters began to proliferate on TV, and gay and lesbian celebrities were increasingly open about their sexual orientation.

The right wing continued its backlash, including two anti-gay state ballot initiatives in 1992: in Oregon, voters eventually defeated the highly funded and publicized Measure 9, which would have banned ordinances protecting the rights of LGBT people and required government agencies, including public schools, to teach that homosexuality was “wrong, unnatural, and perverse.” In Colorado, voters passed the equal-

ly well-funded and publicized Amendment 2, which banned any municipality or county from prohibiting discrimination against LGBT people. In the same year, speakers at the 1992 Republican convention promised a “culture war,” using hateful language against gay men and lesbians.

Meanwhile, lesbian and gay cultural visibility grew with news outlets highlighting the “folks next door” image marchers portrayed in the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation. As Chauncey summarizes, “The continuing attacks on gays made their need for protection even greater, while the dramatic growth of many heterosexuals’ acceptance of gay people made securing some form of legal protection possible.” A few legal strategists began working in earnest on same-sex marriage, with moves in the legal system to secure state recognition beginning in Hawai’i in 1994. The Hawai’i case came very close to winning same-sex marriage rights, but just before a decision was passed, Congress passed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, asserting that the federal government would not recognize same-sex marriage and ensuring that states would not have to uphold the “full faith and credit” clause of the Constitution by recognizing marriages performed in other states.³⁹

Also in 1996, the Supreme Court decided in *Romer v. Evans* that Colorado’s Amendment 2—prohibiting municipalities and other units of government from enacting anti-discrimination policies to protect LGBT people—was unconstitutional, which curtailed most anti-gay ordinances. The backlash shifted form. 25 states passed constitutional amendments defining marriage as the union between a man and a woman, and many municipalities passed local anti-gay statutes. Toward the end of the 1990s,

39 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., p. 123.

the number of bills related to gay rights—both pro and against—dramatically increased in the state legislature. Between 1996-2000, pro-gay bills increased over 350%, with anti-gay bills increasing by 110%.⁴⁰

By 2000, eleven states and the District of Columbia had passed statutes prohibiting workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Right has refused to accept the “minority” model of sexual difference. As gays became more visible, so too did the “ex-gay” movement that began in 1974. This movement insists that homosexuality was a sinful choice made tempting by childhood dysfunction and that gay men and lesbians could be “repaired” therapeutically.⁴¹

In the 1990s, the LGBT movement shifted from being one of loosely affiliated activists to being dominated by large, national institutions, such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF). NGLTF has, since it formed in 1973, focused on coordinating and empowering state- and local-level organizers and has been relatively open to input from people of color, bisexuals, and transgender people. HRC, formed in 1980, has had a more conflicted relationship to the movement: it refused to support transgender inclusion in the federal Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), and as Ghaziani points out, “to many, it seemed to exclusively represent the interests of middle- to upper-middle-class, white gay Americans, motivating some to re-signify the organization’s acronym of ‘HRC’ to ‘Headed by Rich Caucasians.’”⁴² Many LGBT people were outraged by the group’s 1998 endorsement and financial support of New York Republican Senator Al D’Amato, a conservative who had voted against abortion rights and for capital punishment and harsh drug enforcement laws, over Democrat Chuck Schumer, who had supported gay rights for years prior to D’Amato.

With that endorsement, HRC took white male single-issue politics to the extreme.⁴³

The logic of interest-group organizing was also taken to its extreme in the lead-up to the 2000 Millennium March on Washington. With the partial exception of Clinton barring discrimination in federal hiring and contracts, none of the demands of the 1979 March on Washington had been fully achieved. NGLTF saw the struggle as taking place at the state level and sought to help organize marches on every state capital in 2000. However, two groups, the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) and HRC declared that there would be another March on Washington, chose a date, and informed other organizations that they were “expected” to sign on. Organizers were plagued by conflict from the outset because they failed to recognize that the LGBT movement’s strength came from its democratic openness. They treated community input as an unwelcome distraction. Long time black lesbian leader Barbara Smith described the organizing process as “the epitome of undemocratic tactics as well as of racism,” and countless others raised similar objections.⁴⁴ Organizers unilaterally declared the theme to be “Faith and Family,” which seemed to many to be a capitulation to the Religious Right. Eventually they gave in slightly and unilaterally changed the theme to the poorly publicized “Equality: Nothing More, Nothing Less,” though it still drew controversy. A coalition called the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process dogged organizers to reveal their financial records, which one organizer claimed were “none of their business,” inviting observers to remark that they were keeping their records from the lesbian and gay community they claimed to represent. According to a commentary by Gamson in *The Nation*, the Ad Hoc Committee for an Open Process, formed in part by some of the organizers of previous marches, suspected that the event was “a profit-making enterprise masquerading as a lesbian/gay/bi-

40 Ghaziani 2008, op. cit., p. 196.

41 Ibid., p. 203.

42 Ibid., p. 230.

43 Armstrong 2002, op. cit., p. 106.

44 Ghaziani 2008, op. cit., p. 248.

sexual/transgender civil rights rally.” Gamson wrote, “The main story the march opposition wants to tell, is of a movement dominated by arrogant, corporate style, money driven organizations geared toward assimilation, through the marketing of acceptable gayness.”⁴⁵ The event drew crowds estimated to be between 125,000

and 800,000, but lack of diversity in signs and banners amid the sea of blue and yellow HRC logos drew notice. Long-time Illinois interest group activist Rick Garcia called it a “fundraiser for HRC, not a political event.”⁴⁶ When \$750,000 was found to be missing from the event’s funds two weeks afterward, few were surprised.

LGBT Liberation in the 21st Century

While the LGBT movement marched on Washington every six to eight years since 1979, it has not done so again since 2000.

Rather, the movement seems to have been virtually taken over by the pursuit of “gay rights,” particularly same-sex marriage rights—which disproportionately benefit the middle class—at the local and state level. Indeed, the quest for same-sex marriage rights seems to have become wrapped up in gay pride, such that earlier LGBT generations’ critiques of marriage have become virtually unthinkable to many younger LGBT and allied people. Millennium March organizers’ fantasies to the contrary, at the beginning of the 2000s, same-sex marriage did not appear poised to take over the movement. Vermont’s governor Howard Dean had been criticized for supporting Vermont’s civil union law, the first state-wide recognition of same-sex unions in the country. Four years later, support for same-sex marriage—with full equality rather than the “separate and unequal” civil unions—was a mainstream position for the Democrats:

The movement’s success had a palpable impact on people’s lives. Many lesbians and gay men participated in a rich and supportive gay life. Equally important, many no longer found it necessary to hide

*their gayness or their partners in order to participate in the larger social life of their communities. They took their partners home for the holidays, debated the merits of the latest gay film with their heterosexual colleagues, and increasingly assumed they would be accepted on their own terms. A growing number of couples held commitment ceremonies attended by their parents and siblings along with gay and straight friends alike. Many gay youth, and even many heterosexuals, found it hard to believe it had ever been different. The fact that gay couples did not receive the same recognition, protections, or rights that heterosexual couples took for granted began to seem anomalous, not just to many gay people but to their married brothers and sisters.*⁴⁷

In March 1990, same sex marriage was forbidden by statute in six states, and was not specified in the other 44. By December 2000, same sex marriage was forbidden by statute in 37 states. By January 2013, same-sex marriage was legal in nine states and the District of Columbia, and ten states allowed civil unions with all or some of the state benefits of marriage. On the other hand, 18 states had banned same-sex marriage or civil unions in their constitutions, another seven banned same-sex marriage in their constitutions, and five banned it by statute. Only New Mexico had refrained from taking a stand of some sort.⁴⁸

45 Gamson, Joshua. 2000. “The Gay Movement’s Long-Simmering Tensions Erupt in a High-States Mud Fight: Whose Millennium March? *The Nation*, April 17, 2000, p. 16.

46 Ghaziani 2008, pp. 240, 277.

47 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., p. 57.

48 <http://gregstoll.dyndns.org/marriagemap/#-year=2012-12>.

The decade has seen other dramatic changes for gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as well. By 2002, a survey of 319 of America's largest companies reported that 92 percent banned discrimination against gays and lesbians. In 2003, the Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* overturned sodomy laws that had been upheld just 17 years before in *Bowers v. Hardwick*. Justice Anthony Kennedy embraced the "liberty" of gay people to form relationships, "whether or not [they are] entitled to formal recognition in the law," and condemned the *Bowers* decision for "demean[ing] the lives of homosexual persons."⁴⁹ Republican leaders quickly announced plans to push for a Constitutional amendment defining marriage as the relationship between a man and a woman, but the drive for same-sex marriage rights has outpaced that effort, and institutional changes in religion, health-care, and workplaces all suggest that, without a radical shift in American politics, the long-term momentum will be in favor of equality for lesbians and gay men in religious institutions, workplaces, and the law. In 2010, President Obama repealed the military's ban on LGBT people serving, with support from the Pentagon.

Opinion polls by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life have shown support for same-sex marriage rights steadily increasing. In 2001, 57 percent of adults opposed allowing gays and lesbians to legally marry, compared to 35 percent who favored it. In 2012, 44 percent opposed same-sex marriage rights, and 48 percent favored them. As Pew points out, the largest factor in this change is generational: 33 percent of Americans born between 1928 and 1945 favored same-sex marriage rights, while 63 percent of those born since 1981 did, with support increasing with each intervening generation.⁵⁰

The political back and forth continues, with conservatives proffering challenges to the rights of gay men and lesbians and the LGBT mainstream movement working to secure them. In the November 2012 elections, voters in two cities in Kansas repealed ordinances banning anti-LGBT discrimination—that is to say, they voted to allow employers and landlords to legally discriminate against lesbians and gay men—even as voters in Maine, Maryland, and Washington elected to allow same-sex marriage in their states and voters in Minnesota voted down a constitutional amendment that would have banned it.

Interest-group politics focusing on the right to marry have dominated lesbian and gay organizing resources, but identity politics are still going strong. Gay/Straight Alliances are present in many high schools and colleges. Around the country, one can find large-scale conferences of college LGBT groups and movements for greater inclusivity of LGBT people in many religious institutions, including the ordination of openly gay men and lesbians and religious recognition of same-sex marriage. Rituals of identity politics such as pride parades and rallies continue to carry the legacy of Stonewall, even as they become ever more dominated by the voices of corporations and politicians seeking to collect gay money and votes rather than to hear what LGBT people have to say. The commercial appropriation of LGBT people as a market, which began in the 1990s, continues unabated.⁵¹

The newest developments of identity politics can be found in social media. For instance, in 2010, syndicated advice columnist Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller, began *It Gets Better*, a grassroots identity-building movement on YouTube, where adults tell their personal stories to offer hope particularly to younger LGBT people whose lives feel nearly unbearable due to anti-gay bullying and violence. Such social

49 Chauncey 2004, op. cit., pp. 52, 1.

50 Pew Research Forum. 2012. Changing Attitudes on Gay Marriage. <http://features.pewforum.org/same-sex-marriage-attitudes/download.php>.

51 Chasin, Alexandra. 2000. *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*. New York: St. Martin's.

media efforts have filled in a void in the identity-building project of LGBT politics, potentially reaching people who are still isolated from physical LGBT communities while extending the reach of identity politics through technology.

The socially transformative vein of LGBT politics seems the least vibrant and far-reaching at this time. Groups such as Queers for Economic Justice in New York and GenderJUST in Chicago carry the banner of redistributive politics, advocating wide-scale social justice projects through local organizing efforts. People who identify as queer and who espouse multi-issue, intersectional politics can be found pro-

testing what some call “pinkwashing” (using LGBT rights in Israel to distract from the effects of occupation on Palestinians), organizing for abortion rights for women, and protesting corporate influence in politics as part of the Occupy movement. The queer voice is also carried in the writings of critics writing in both the academic press and in smaller, non-academic venues such as *Bitch* and *The Nation*. While the LGBT movement has incorporated transgender activism in name, those who identify as queers are more likely to advocate for greater recognition and removal of the particular forms of institutional discrimination confronting trans individuals.

Into the Future

Many lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans people revel in the unprecedented normalcy and respectability afforded to them. Anti-gay violence and bigotry have not disappeared, but it is thanks to the efforts of those who have sacrificed for the LGBT movement over the past sixty years that for many, it is a wonderful time to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual—particularly to the extent that one is relatively wealthy, white, and male (it is a bit less wonderful for many trans people). That success makes the exclusions all the more striking and illustrates the need for attention to how race and class change the meaning of LGBT identities.

For instance, in Chicago the gentrification and eventual institutionalization of a predominantly gay male neighborhood, now officially known by the once-slang “Boystown,” has seen the building of an expensive, modern, gay community center. Conflicts have arisen between mostly white neighborhood homeowners and gay and transsexual youth of color, whom some homeowners want the police to prosecute for “loitering” near an LGBT center in a gay neighborhood.

So who are “we?” Which LGBT people belong in a neighborhood officially marked as “gay?”

The LGBT movement has been strongest when organizers have been open to rethinking and redefining the identity at the core of the movement to create a more inclusive movement. When the “we” has broadened to include white women, people of color, bisexuals and trans people of all races, it has developed stronger critiques of sexual oppression. An LGBT movement that fights racism can embrace people of color as participants and leaders, while an LGBT movement that sees racism as “other people’s problem” defines itself in racist terms and repels potential participants and allies. Trans people have always struggled with, and confused, many lesbian and gay organizers.⁵² Like bisexuals, trans people have been incorporated into the names of LGBT organizations and the movement but not into the substance of these organizations’ programs. Both disrupt the gen-

⁵² Ghaziani 2008, op. cit., p. 255; Namaste, Viviane. 2000. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

der dichotomy that lesbian and gay identity politics reaffirms. However, a gay movement that embraces transgendered and bisexual people could be strong, vibrant, and multivocal, allowing members to learn from each other about how to confront gender ideology and gendered institutions that oppress them all. It is not only exclusive but counterproductive for lesbians and gay men to fight for job protections only for those who “look straight” and confirm the culturally-imposed gender binary that makes homosexuality troubling to many people in the first place.

The amalgam of identity and interest-group politics provides the dominant language of political participation in the United States, but it is up to social movement members to define their own goals. Black feminists have pointed out that we all live not as discrete minorities but rather at the intersection of racial, gender, ethnic, class, sexual, and other categories, and the meanings of those intersections can have both positive and negative material consequences in people's lives.⁵³ Only truly *universal* rights, accorded on

⁵³ Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*,

the basis of personhood, define a truly just society. As Epstein argued in 1987,

It would be unfortunate to reduce the politics of gay liberation to nothing more than the self-interested actions of an interest group, in competition with other such groups for various resources; such a model would imply that gays have no interests in common with other oppressed groups, and would almost entirely abandon any notion of a broader role for the gay movement in radical politics.⁵⁴

It is likely that LGBT politics will continue to operate according to its current, minoritizing logic. But to the extent that the goals of interest-group politics are ever attained, what becomes of the weaker groups among those the movement claims to speak for? It remains to be seen what will make the universalizing quest for justice plausible once again in the American system. But it is that logic we need if our goals are to be greater than allowing some gays to join the ranks of the “haves” as they become increasingly divided from the “have nots.”

Second edition. New York: Taylor and Francis; Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1992. “Whose Story is it, Anyway? Feminist and Antiracist Appropriations of Anita Hill.” In: *Racing Justice, En-gendering Power*, ed. by Toni Morrison. New York: Pantheon, pp. 402-40.

⁵⁴ Epstein 1987, op. cit., p. 22.

Related Studies

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