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**SEXUAL POLITICS,
SEXUAL COMMUNITIES**

The Making of a
Homosexual Minority
in the United States
1940-1970

JOHN D'EMILIO

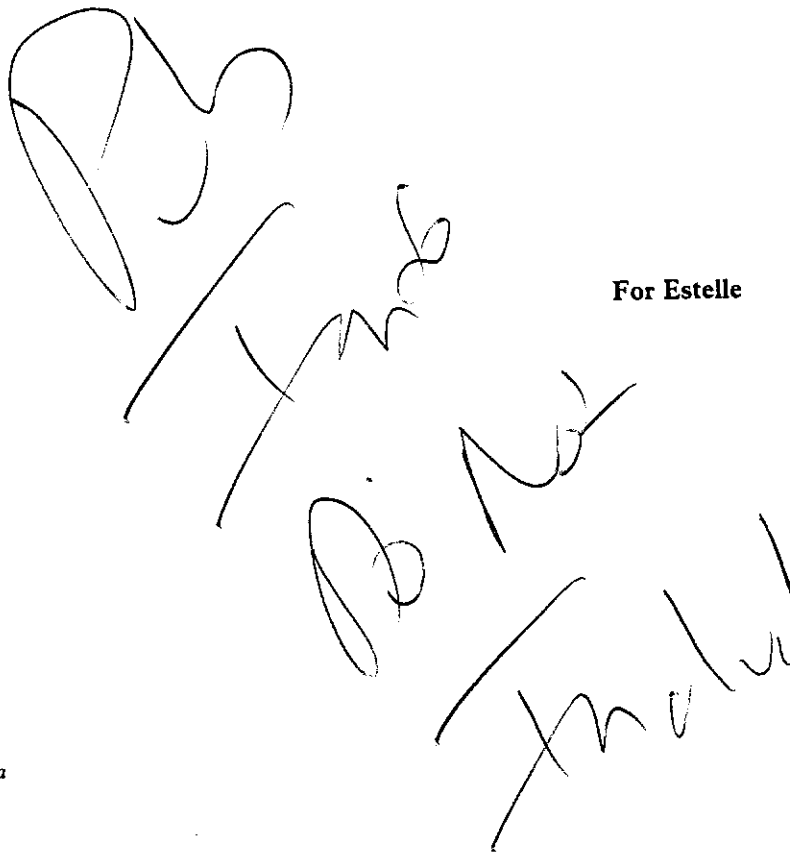
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A New Beginning: The Birth of Gay Liberation

The homophile movement had escaped the doldrums of its first decade in large part through the influence of the emerging protest movements that appeared near the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s. To Kameny and other East Coast militants the civil rights struggle, from the Montgomery bus boycott to the sit-ins and freedom rides, offered compelling evidence of the success of direct action techniques in combating discrimination. Randy Wicker had participated in civil rights efforts in Texas before coming to New York, while other activists like Barbara Gittings, Kay Tobin, Dick Leitsch, and Jack Nichols peppered their speeches and articles with references to the movement for racial equality. In San Francisco, the cultural dissent of the beats, though less overtly political, helped shake a segment of the male homosexual subculture out of its acceptance of the status quo. Although the homophile movement never managed to fire the imagination of its constituency during the 1960s, it owed whatever dynamism it did possess to the example set by other discontented groups.

By the late 1960s, however, a distinctively new culture of protest had taken shape in the United States, with which the reform orientation of the gay movement contrasted oddly. At Columbia University, for instance, the student homophile league peacefully picketed a forum on homosexuality on the same day that black and white student radicals initiated a week-long occupation of campus buildings. Two weeks after delegates to the 1968 NACHO convention in Chicago conducted parliamentary debates according to Robert's Rules of Order, police battled antiwar activists in the city's streets. In San Francisco, members of SIR and DOB sat through candidates' nights and registered voters while the hippie counterculture—the heirs of the beats—

staged colorful, flamboyant be-ins in Golden Gate Park. The gay movement continued to pursue equality through the courts at a time when militant civil rights workers were shifting toward a strategy of community organizing and an ideology of black power. As homophile activists marched with neatly lettered placards in front of federal buildings, urban ghettos burst into flame, bombs exploded in banks and military-connected university facilities, and Black Panthers and Weathermen called for "armed struggle" against American imperialism. A generation of blacks and whites, men and women, was rising in revolt, but for the most part homophile activists remained curiously detached from the rebellions that were rocking the nation.

Despite the distance between gay activists and young radicals, the protests of the 1960s had more than superficial relevance to the situation of homosexuals and lesbians. Each of the separate strands of the "Movement"—black power, the student New Left, the counterculture, and women's liberation—spoke in a special way to gay women and men. Taken together and appropriated by those stigmatized for their sexuality, the ideology and tactics of the mass movements of the 1960s had the power to transform not only the organized struggle of homosexuals and lesbians for freedom but also the everyday quality and condition of gay life in the United States.

I

Young black militants in organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress of Racial Equality led the move from the exuberant, optimistic reform spirit of the early 1960s to the angry, confrontational politics of the second half of the decade. By 1965 the successes of the civil rights movement had provoked a "crisis of victory," as racial inequality proved more intractable than the Southern legal codes that buttressed it. The combination of violent attacks by Southern whites, a sense of betrayal by Northern liberals and Democratic politicians, the explosive anger of ghetto residents, the growing appeal of the nationalist Black Muslims, and the war in Vietnam aroused impatience among many civil rights veterans and bred a cynicism toward the integrationist goals and nonviolent tactics that initially characterized the struggle for racial justice.¹

When SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael raised the black power cry in June 1966, he voiced more than a slogan. Black power quickly came to embody a distinctive form of politics and culture. In many ways it represented a reversal of the dominant, long-term trend in American society, the assimilation of ethnic and cultural minorities in the American melting pot. Black power

1. On the civil rights movement, see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1973); David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (Chicago, 1978); Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, 1964); and Benjamin Muse, *Ten Years of Prelude: The Story of Integration Since the Supreme Court's 1954 Decision* (New York, 1965). The phrase "crisis of victory" comes from a speech by A. Philip Randolph in January 1965, quoted in Meier and Rudwick, p. 329.

advocates began speaking about structural racism and systematic oppression rather than prejudice and discrimination. As their goals, liberation replaced equality, and self-determination superseded integration. They talked of organizing the black community, fashioning an independent power base, and preserving their autonomy and separateness from white society. Instead of minimizing the differences between the races, these new militants celebrated them. Black became beautiful, as young radicals took the stigma out of skin color and made it a source of pride.²

Comparable changes in the white student movement paralleled the shift among blacks. After first acting in support of the Southern civil rights movement, activists in Students for a Democratic Society switched toward organizing among the white poor in northern cities. But the Berkeley campus uprising in the autumn of 1964 revealed depths of discontent with the quality of their own lives, the kind of education they received, and the adult roles that awaited them in society. The war in Vietnam, with its sharp rise in draft calls, intensified the disaffection of college youth. Idealism and, for male students, self-preservation worked together to create in quick fashion a massive antiwar movement that targeted both the government and the institutions of higher learning that students accused of complicity in the war. As the decade wore on, New Left activism moved rapidly along a line from reform to resistance and, at least rhetorically, revolution.³

While many of the young channeled their energy into political protest and directed their fury toward institutions, others adopted a cultural radicalism. In some ways the hippie counterculture and the New Left worked at cross purposes, but in other ways they complemented and reinforced one another. In rebelling against the hypocrisy and alienation of modern American life, counterculture enthusiasts rejected the detached, objective mode of scientific inquiry that seemed to lead inexorably to the conflagration in Vietnam and pursued instead a politics of experience that celebrated the subjective. The counterculture sought a revolution in consciousness, a transformation of self that would create a personality, ethics, and style of living consistent with the political and social criticism of the New Left. Young hippies refused to conform to the expectations and values of white middle-class America. They constructed alternative living arrangements, adopted new styles of dress, ingested mind-expanding drugs, and embraced a sexual morality that often shocked ordinary Americans. Embedded in this experimentation was the

2. On the black power movement, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York, 1967); Benjamin Muse, *The American Negro Revolution: From Non-Violence to Black Power, 1963-1967* (Bloomington, Ind., 1967); and Allen J. Matusow, "From Civil Rights to Black Power: The Case of SNCC, 1960-1966," in Barton J. Bernstein and Allen J. Matusow, eds., *Twentieth Century America: Recent Interpretations* (New York, 1969).

3. On the white student movement, the New Left, and the antiwar movement, see Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York, 1973); Priscilla Long, ed., *The New Left: A Collection of Essays* (Boston, 1969); Michael Ferber and Staughton Lynd, *The Resistance* (Boston, 1971); and Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau, *The New Radicals* (New York, 1966).

conviction that one *could* remake one's self, that the quest for authenticity and fulfillment in a corrupt society *was* attainable—in short, that one could live the revolution now.⁴

Eventually, white women in the New Left took many of the key concepts that underlay the radicalism of the decade, applied them to their own situation, and, out of the tension between rhetoric and reality, created a women's liberation movement. The stress within the civil rights movement and among early SDS members on equality, self-determination, and participatory democracy almost demanded a resurgence of feminism, as young radical women found their contributions to the New Left devalued, their leadership capacity inhibited, and their identities submerged in those of the men with whom they were intimate. Moreover, the peculiar combination of politics and culture that characterized protest in the 1960s gave a boost to the women's movement. By rejecting traditional forms of family life, the counterculture delegitimized the normative female role of housewife and mother. Yet, paradoxically, its pursuit of a free-flowing, unrestricted sexuality also intensified for young women the experience of sexual objectification. Under the guise of liberation, politicized women endured new forms of alienating human relationships.⁵

Women's liberation added another dimension to political protest. Radical feminists questioned the very categories of male and female upon which most individuals' sense of self could rest securely. Women placed gender alongside race and class as a systematically enforced, socially constructed form of inequality. The injustices committed by fathers, husbands, and lovers were no more excusable than those of generals at the Pentagon. Intimate relationships became arenas of struggle, the bedroom and the kitchen battlegrounds, as women's liberationists fashioned a sexual politics that encompassed every aspect of personal life.⁶

Though much of the decade's rhetoric was overblown and never delivered what it promised, it nonetheless proved rousing enough to prod millions of the young and the not so young into action against social injustice or into revamping their own lives. In fact, the radicalism of the 1960s derived its force in no small part because it bound the personal and the political so tightly together that the two could no longer be distinguished. Even the vocabulary of the Movement had dual meanings. The right of self-determination could be applied to individuals as well as to a people; revolutions occurred in both consciousness and society; the future shape of the country could be found not

4. On the counterculture, see Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969).

5. On the radical origins of the women's liberation movement, see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York, 1979); Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York, 1971); and Jo Freeman, *The Politics of Women's Liberation* (New York, 1975).

6. For the writings of early women's liberationists, see Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood Is Powerful* (New York, 1970); Ann Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone, eds., *Radical Feminism* (New York, 1973); Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y., 1970); and Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York, 1970).

only in alternative institutions but in alternative styles of living. The affirmation of subjective personal experience as a primary source of knowledge and a reliable guide to action encouraged many Americans to make decisions they might otherwise not have risked and to see those choices as part of a vast movement for social change.

II

The homophile movement did not, of course, remain untouched by the radical politics of the 1960s. Here and there one could detect evidence of a new outlook, a desire to push beyond the civil rights integrationist orientation that made up the militant wing of the movement. Early in 1967, for instance, a stepped-up police campaign in Los Angeles against gay bars, including two New Year's Eve raids that left a bartender hospitalized with a ruptured spleen and a number of gay male patrons beaten by officers, provoked the largest gay demonstration of the decade. Several hundred homosexuals rallied on Sunset Boulevard, where they listened to angry speakers intoning the phrases of confrontational politics. The turmoil at Columbia University in the spring of 1968 radicalized the campus homophile group, which joined the student strike and, later, brought its New Left perspective to the NACHO convention in Chicago. Rebuffed by their more moderate colleagues, the student activists turned their attention to organizing gay groups on other campuses. Alternative institutions, premised on the special needs of a distinctive gay community, started to appear. In Los Angeles in 1968, Dick Michaels and Bill Rand began publishing the *Advocate*, a hard-hitting newspaper whose contents evinced an aggressive pride in being gay. That October, Troy Perry officiated at the first service of the Metropolitan Community Church before a gay congregation responding to an announcement in the *Advocate*. In New York, the success of Craig Rodwell's Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookstore proved that lesbians and gay men wanted a retail outlet that catered to their reading tastes. Now and then individual activists such as Martha Shelley in New York and Morgan Pinney in San Francisco contributed articles to organizational magazines that tried to make connections between the situation of gay men and lesbians and the burgeoning protest movements of blacks, students, and women. For the most part, however, these efforts were harbingers of the future, and the dissenters remained solitary voices that failed to alter the direction of the homophile movement.⁷

7. On the Los Angeles bar raids and rallies, see *Concern* (newsletter of the Southern California Council on Religion and the Homophile), January 1967, p. 3, and February 1967, pp. 1-2, and press release, Tavern Guild of Southern California, January 5, 1967, in New York Mattachine Society Archives (hereafter referred to as NYMS); *Los Angeles Free Press*, February 17, 1967, p. 6, and March 10, 1967, p. 5. On the Student Homophile League at Columbia, see "Student Homophile League Joins Strike," flyer, May 4, 1968, and SHL memo to NACHO convention, August 16, 1968, both in NYMS. On alternative institutions, see the chapters on Dick Michaels, Troy Perry, and Craig Rodwell in Kay Tobin and Randy Wicker, *The Gay Crusaders* (New York, 1972). See also Morgan Pinney, "Telling It Like It Is: State College from a Homosexual

The experience of both DOB and SIR illustrates the resistance of gay reformers to the radical spirit of the late 1960s. In the case of DOB the issue was feminism—what it meant for the organization and how best to adapt its insights to the situation of lesbians. By 1966 a new women's movement was taking shape in the United States, and its ideas allowed DOB members to reinterpret the conflicts that occasionally erupted between them and gay male activists. Instead of justifying their organizational autonomy by pointing to the lesbian's need for a space of her own, officers defended their independence on the grounds of political interest. "The lesbian is discriminated against not only because she is a lesbian, but because she is a woman," Shirley Willer told delegates to the 1966 NACHO convention. "Lesbian interest is more closely linked with the women's civil rights movement than with the homosexual civil liberties movement." Del Martin, who joined the San Francisco chapter of the National Organization for Women in 1967, quickly became one of its officers and shifted her energy from the homophile movement to women's issues. She too questioned the wisdom of DOB's continuing alliance with the gay rights cause. "The Lesbian," she wrote in the *Ladder*,

is first of all a *woman*. . . . It is time that the Daughters of Bilitis and the Lesbian find and establish a much broader identification than that of the homosexual community or the homophile movement. The "battle of the sexes" which predominates in American Society prevails in the homosexual community as well and the Lesbian finds herself relegated to an even more inferior status.

After 1966 feminist concerns arose frequently in DOB. The *Ladder* devoted considerable space to articles about the status of women, sex discrimination, and the activities of women's rights groups such as NOW.⁸

However, oldtimers in DOB also displayed an ambivalence about an alliance with women's rights organizations, especially if it meant making a choice between heterosexual women and gay men. Shirley Willer, for instance, did not believe that heterosexual women would ever "give up their pedestals," and she preferred working with male homosexuals despite the many instances of "chauvinism." Meredith Grey also expressed serious reservations over the wisdom of lesbians working within feminist organizations. She doubted that "Miss Friedan's group . . . would accept my sisters as happily as [it] would accept my money" and rejected Del Martin's suggestion that DOB leave the homophile fold. Even Martin waffled on the question of where lesbians should

Perspective," *Vector*, January 1969, pp. 5–6; and Martha Shelley, "Homosexuality and Sexual Identity," *Ladder*, August 1968, pp. 6–7.

8. Shirley Willer, "The Lesbian, the Homosexual and the Homophile Movement," *Vector*, October 1966, pp. 8–9; and Del Martin, "The Lesbian's Majority Status," *Ladder*, June 1967, pp. 24–26. For other examples of the *Ladder's* interest in women's status, see issues of December 1966, pp. 15–16; February 1967, pp. 2–5; August 1967, pp. 2–4; October–November 1968, pp. 18–24; and December 1968, pp. 16–17.

place their primary allegiance. After a homophile conference in which lesbian grievances received an airing, she declared herself "happy to eat my words" about the need to disengage from the gay movement. Initially, the developing interest in feminism caused barely a ripple in the placid surface of either DOB or the larger homophile movement.⁹

The situation changed abruptly late in 1968, when new women came to the helm of DOB, and the terms of the debate shifted from women's rights to women's liberation. Rita Laporte, who by her own admission became president of DOB largely because "no one else wants the job," brought a radical feminist perspective to the office. "As I see it," she wrote to Barbara Gittings,

when you've accomplished your aims in the homophile movement, you can proudly point to the fact that now lesbians have *full* second class citizenship, along with all women. That's nowhere near enough for me. I was not only born a lesbian, but a feminist as well! My first cry was one of fury at being considered second rate because of being female.¹⁰

Along with Barbara Grier, who became editor of the *Ladder*, she transformed the magazine into a publication that blazed a distinctly lesbian-feminist trail. More polemical and less compromising, the *Ladder* now presented lesbianism as the embodiment of feminist principles. "No heterosexual woman can match the passion some of us lesbians have for our rights," Laporte wrote. She also pressed for a withdrawal of DOB from NACHO. "It needs to be said over and over again that the real gap within humanity is that between men and women, not that between homosexual and heterosexual," she declared. Among women, lesbians alone could fight for the liberation of their sisters, unhampered by ties with men, Laporte argued, and she urged DOB members not "to dissipate this force by, in effect, a sort of group 'marriage' . . . to the male homophile community."¹¹

Though sentiments such as these would soon mobilize tens of thousands of lesbians across the country, they ended up destroying DOB and the *Ladder*. Oldtimers were especially furious at what was happening to the magazine. In their view, the *Ladder* belonged to the women of DOB collectively, not to a few leaders, and should speak to all lesbians, particularly those who were taking their first tentative steps toward self-recognition. Sten Russell came to see the election of Laporte as "a damned debacle, a damned disaster. The thing that we believed in and loved was cracking up. . . . The women's lib movement was coming very much to the fore [with] a whole new bunch of people who

9. Interview with Shirley Willer, conducted by Toby Marotta, 1975; Meredith Grey, letter, *Ladder*, August 1967, pp. 20–21; and Del Martin, letter, *Ladder*, July 1967, p. 27.

10. Rita Laporte to Barbara Gittings, August 20, 1968, personal papers of Frank Kameny, Washington, D.C. Laporte's comment on why she was elected president can be found in a letter to Gittings dated August 4, 1968, also in the Kameny papers.

11. Rita Laporte, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," *Ladder*, October–November 1968, p. 25, and Rita Laporte, "Of What Use NACHO?" *Ladder*, August–September 1969, pp. 18–19.

were talking a language that we didn't understand. . . . DOB was dying. It took from 1968 to 1970 to pound the nails into the coffin." When DOB members, including Martin and Lyon, laid plans to recover control of the *Ladder* at the 1970 convention, Laporte and Grier simply boycotted the gathering, made off with the organization's membership and subscription list, and began publishing the magazine independently. Without the *Ladder* to subsidize, DOB had little reason to maintain its national structure. The membership sadly agreed to dissolve the national organization, letting each chapter survive as best it could. The *Ladder*, meanwhile, without financial support, ceased publication a short while later. The lesbian wing of the homophile movement proved unable to cope with the intrusion of the new radicalism.¹²

SIR also came face to face with the political style of the late 1960s after its members, early in 1969, chose Leo Laurence to edit the organization's magazine. A staffer at KGO radio in San Francisco, the thirty-six-year-old Laurence had covered the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, where he witnessed the bloody confrontations between police and antiwar demonstrators. He returned to San Francisco "radicalized," impressed by the willingness of the young protesters to put themselves on the line for their beliefs. Laurence began writing for the Berkeley *Barb*, a New Left weekly, and for SIR's *Vector*. Extolling the importance of being honest about one's sexuality, he posed with his lover for a semi-naked photo that appeared in the *Barb*. Shortly after his election to the editorship of *Vector*, he wrote that "this is the beginning of a new revolution in San Francisco, the Homosexual Revolution of 1969. When the black man became proud, he became more militant. That same power is starting to hit the homosexual movement in the Bay Area." Laurence argued that gays should form coalitions with the Black Panthers, the antiwar movement, and other radical groups. He counseled homosexuals not to wait for "the right political climate" but to "demand our personal liberty and freedom right NOW!" In the language of the counterculture, he equated revolution with changes in consciousness. "We have to get over this bullshit of guilt, the feeling we are degenerates," he said in an interview. "After we can admit to ourselves 'gay is good,' the revolution will come." Laurence called on homosexuals to "come out from behind a double-life. . . . Say you're gay at work, at home, at church, wherever you go."¹³

Laurence might have survived in SIR if he had confined his rhetoric to a general call to arms, but when he turned his fire on the homophile movement, SIR's other officers acted decisively. In the April issue of *Vector* Laurence

accused "timid leaders" of "enormous ego-trips, middle-class bigotry and racism," of "hurting almost every major homosexual organization." The same month, in the *Barb*, he dismissed homophile activists as "a bunch of middle-class, uptight, bitchy old queens." In May Laurence found himself out of the editorship and out of the organization. SIR persevered in its reform brand of civil rights politics, while Laurence went on to form the Committee for Homosexual Freedom, which tried to adapt New Left perspectives to the struggle for homosexual equality.¹⁴

Although homophile leaders could hold the line against the incursion of radical politics into the movement, they could not block its entry to the larger gay community. Especially among the young, the influence of the new culture of protest was too pervasive for the gay male and lesbian subculture to remain immune. Instead, the unresponsiveness of homophile activists guaranteed that when the decade's radicalism did reach homosexual men and women, it would spawn a movement that would rapidly overwhelm its predecessor.

III

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.¹⁵

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

12. Interview with Sten Russell, October 24, 1976, in Costa Mesa, Calif. Martin, Lyon, and Helen Sanders also commented at length on the conflict with Laporte and Grier in my interviews with them. See also Meredith Grey to Frank Kameny, September 8, 1968, Kameny papers. For a report on the 1970 DOB convention, see New York DOB *Newsletter*, August 1970, p. 1.

13. Leo Laurence to Dorr Legg, March 3, 1969, SIR file, ONE, Inc., Archives, Los Angeles; and *Berkeley Barb*, March 28, 1969, p. 5; February 7, 1969; and April 4, 1969, p. 11.

14. *Vector*, April 1969, p. 11; and *Berkeley Barb*, April 11, 1969, p. 11. On the action taken against Laurence and his ouster from SIR, see "Gold Sheet," newsheet for SIR members, May 1969, in SIR file, ONE, Inc., Archives.

15. The description of the Stonewall riot in this and succeeding paragraphs is drawn from the following sources: *Village Voice*, July 3, 1969, p. 1; *New York Times*, June 29, 1969, p. 33, and June 30, 1969, p. 22; and New York *Mattachine Newsletter*, July 1969, pp. 21-25, and August 1969, pp. 1-6.

last of the patrons, a lesbian, through the bystanders to a nearby patrol car. "She put up a struggle," the *Village Voice* 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.¹⁶

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 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."¹⁷ 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.

IV

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 daring 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.¹⁸

18. On the gay liberation presence at radical demonstrations, see Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York, 1971), pp. 52–53, 68–69, 98, 165–74, 179–83, 218–19; *Berkeley Tribe*, September 12, 1969, p. 5; *Berkeley Barb*, October 10, 1969, p. 12; and "March in San Francisco November 15th," Gay liberation flyer in the possession of Bois Burk, Berkeley, California.

16. *Village Voice*, July 3, 1969, p. 18.

17. *Ibid.*

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*, 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!¹⁹

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.²⁰

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

19. GLF Statement of Purpose, July 31, 1969, reprinted in *RAT*, August 12, 1969.

20. Berkeley GLF, "Resolution on the War and Draft," May 4, 1970; and Los Angeles GLF, "What Is Gay Liberation? A Statement of Purpose," n.d., both in Homosexual Organization Files, Institute for Sex Research, Bloomington, Indiana. For other early gay liberation writings, see Karla Jay and Allen Young, eds., *Out of the Closets* (New York, 1972). Of the influential early radical gay liberation newspapers, see esp. *Gay Liberator* (Detroit), *Gay Sunshine* (San Francisco), *Fag Rag* (Boston), *Body Politic* (Toronto), and *Come Out!* (New York). The best analysis of the political perspective of gay liberation remains that of Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (New York, 1972). See also Toby Marotta, *The Politics of Homosexuality* (Boston, 1981).

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.²¹

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. 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 pro-

21. Donn Teal provides in *The Gay Militants* an extensive chronicle of gay liberation demonstrations from 1969 to 1971. On the "zaps" of the AMA and APA conventions, see Gary Alinder, "Gay Liberation Meets the Shrinks"; and Chicago Gay Liberation Front, "A Leaflet for the American Medical Association," in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, pp. 141-46.

pelled 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.²²

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:

22. On the emergence of a lesbian-feminist movement, see Teal, *The Gay Militants*, pp. 179-94; Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, *Sappho Was a Right-on Woman* (New York, 1972); Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, pp. 172-203; and Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, eds., *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* (Baltimore, 1975). *The Furies* (Washington, D.C.) and *Lesbian Tide* (Los Angeles) are two of the influential lesbian-feminist periodicals from the early 1970s.

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.²³

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.²⁴

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.

V

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

23. Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman," reprinted in Jay and Young, *Out of the Closets*, pp. 172-77.

24. For the phenomenon of women who came out as lesbians via the women's liberation movement, see the autobiographical essays in Myron and Bunch, eds., *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*; Julia Penelope Stanley and Susan J. Wolfe, eds., *The Coming Out Stories* (Watertown, Mass., 1980); and Nancy and Casey Adair, *Word Is Out* (San Francisco, 1978).

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 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.