

Gay and Lesbian Movements

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This article is a revision of the previous edition article by D. Altman, volume 9, pp. 5895–5899, © 2001, Elsevier Ltd.

Abstract

Since World War II, the gay and lesbian movement in the United States has grown from a small network to a large movement. This article traces the origins of the US gay and lesbian movement from before World War II to the turn of the twenty-first century.

Introduction/Overview

The gay and lesbian movement in the United States developed in response to the growing public spaces for gay life, along with large-scale social changes initiated by World War II and urbanization processes. Although this movement has undergone many changes over time and includes many smaller movements, these movements have been fundamentally oriented toward outcomes of visibility and recognition, including recognition through the establishment of laws and policies. These movements have also become increasingly inclusive and expansive, including more attention to the role of class, race, and gender in gay and lesbian organizing, along with the inclusion of bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and intersex organizing at different points in time. This article divides the history of gay/lesbian movements into the closet era (pre-World War II), the beginning of the coming out era (World War II to Stonewall), gay liberation and lesbian feminism, human immunodeficiency virus infection/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS), the Religious Right and culture wars, and same-sex marriage in the contemporary lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement.

The Closet Era (Pre-World War II)

The period before World War II is often referred to by sociologists as 'the closet era,' a time in which gay and lesbian identities were largely underground and unorganized. Although often referred to by scholars as 'the closet era,' historians suggest that 'the closet' was not a meaningful metaphor for gay and lesbian individuals during this time period (Chauncey, 1994).

The creation of a movement around gay and lesbian identities necessitates the development of the modern concept of the 'homosexual' as a certain kind of subject who is attracted to same-sex individuals. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the budding discipline of sexology and work by European sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld developed a concept of the 'sexual invert,' an individual who defied gender norms with their behavior and attraction to individuals of the same sex.

However, the modern concept of homosexuality as a type of same-sex desire without being simultaneously marked by

gender deviance was not developed until after the turn of the century. According to research by George Chauncey (1994) on the development of the gay world in pre-World War II New York City, in working class communities this modern concept of homosexuality did not develop until the 1930s.

According to scholars like John D'Emilio (1983), the development of industrialization and spread of wage labor created the conditions for the emergence of gay and lesbian culture. Capitalistic industrialization dramatically transformed family life, sexual relations, and heterosexuality, which in turn laid the conditions for public spaces such as gay bars. These developments also created different structural conditions for gay and lesbian lives, as white, middle-class men had more access to wage labor and urban public spaces. Before World War II, there was some early political organizing in the United States and abroad. This organizing included the German organization the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee created by Magnus Hirschfeld in 1897 and advocacy by gay men in New York City over police repression in the 1930s (Chauncey, 1994).

The Beginning of the Coming Out Era (World War II to Stonewall)

World War II dramatically transformed social life in the United States. It moved both men and women into the cities and into the military, creating more opportunities for homosocial connections independent of the family. In his groundbreaking book, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two*, Allan Bérubé (1990) analyzes the way military life during the war both constrained and created opportunities for gay men and lesbians to meet others and explore their sexuality. The war years facilitated entry into the gay world for many men and women at this time.

An urban gay subculture grew in the wake of World War II, in spite of growing public hostility toward homosexuality and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles in the 1950s. Exclusive gay bars were established in cities across the country (D'Emilio, 1983). The gay and lesbian bar was critical in creating the conditions for movement organizing due to the ways it created public spaces, solidarity, and collective identities (Kennedy and Davis, 1993). Although racial and ethnic minorities were frequently excluded from gay bars, black and

Hispanic gay men and lesbians may have congregated at house parties and urban drag balls often.

This growing lesbian and gay subculture was supported by Alfred Kinsey's work in the 1940s and his publication of the *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, which documented widespread experience with same-sex behavior among men. Kinsey's work disputed prevailing ideas that all adults were either homosexual or heterosexual and demonstrated instead that many adult men were sexually fluid (D'Emilio, 1983). By documenting the breadth of sexual variation, Kinsey's work aided gays in their efforts to describe themselves as something more than a very small minority with highly unusual behaviors.

This developing subculture provided a fertile ground for the first gay and lesbian activist organizations in the United States; homophile organizations devoted to educating homosexual men and women and engaging in small-scale social actions. In 1951, gay men founded the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. The secret cell-like structure of the homophile organization was modeled after Communist organizations and allowed branches of the organization to be founded across the country yet operate in secrecy even from each other (D'Emilio, 1983). The lesbian homophile organization Daughter of Bilitis (DOB) was founded in the mid-1950s by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in San Francisco, and by the end of the 1950s, there were several DOB chapters across the country (Faderman, 1991). Both Mattachine and DOB published their own magazines (*ONE* magazine and *The Ladder*, respectively), and engaged in small-scale social actions, including protesting police entrapment in Los Angeles in 1952. During the more liberal 1960s, homophile organizations became more visible and confrontational. The visibility and growth of other movements such as the civil rights movement and student movement also buoyed homophile activism and enforced the viability of different tactics. For example, after the Homophile League of New York picketed a military induction center in the early 1960s, other homophile groups engaged in picketing in front of the White House and Pentagon (Faderman, 1991).

This increasing visibility included the involvement of gay men and lesbians in other social movements. For example, Bayard Rustin, a gay African-American man, was the lead organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Lesbians were involved in the growing second-wave feminist movement, which gave them frames to interpret their relationship to gay homophile activists. The shift of lesbian organizing to feminist organizations led to the dissolution of the DOB in 1970 due to conflicts over feminist radicalism (D'Emilio, 1983).

The increasing militancy included riots and visible protest in US cities in the late 1960s, including rejecting police harassment at the New Year's Ball Raid in 1965 in San Francisco, at the Compton's Cafeteria in August 1966 in San Francisco, and at the Black Cat bar in Los Angeles in 1967 (Armstrong and Cragg, 2006). The 'turning point' of this militancy is often described as the riot in response to the raid on the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village in the early hours of 29 June 1969. Gay bar patrons fought back against the police raid in an event that was commemorated and memorialized as the beginning of the contemporary gay and lesbian movement in the United States.

Gay Liberation and Lesbian Feminism

Although the growth of the gay liberation movement is often attributed to the riot at the Stonewall Inn, the strength of the movement probably resulted from the dramatic rise in radicalism in the late 1960s. Several movements including the civil rights movement and antiwar movement radicalized; this radicalism included growing discontent at institutions, expression of revolutionary sentiment, and cultural radicalism. Cultural radicalism included not only separatism but also the growth of the counterculture, which endorsed alternative gender and sexual norms for men and women.

The gay liberation movement developed quickly after Stonewall. The first gay pride march commemorated the riots in June 1970 and included thousands of men and women marching from Greenwich Village to Central Park (D'Emilio, 1983). Groups such as the Gay Liberation Front and Street Transvestite Activist Revolutionaries were established in New York City and San Francisco, but gay liberation organizations quickly spread across the country. This 'liberation moment' in the gay/lesbian movement included a new emphasis on 'coming out' to the public and on gay cultural pride, which was part of the influence of identity politics movements on gay liberation (Armstrong, 2002). Early gay liberationists were involved in other movements' actions along with taking to the street in more visible and radical forms of activism around issues like the criminalization and medicalization of homosexuality. This militancy was buoyed by the assassination of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay person to be elected to public office in California.

The politics of gay liberation in the United States was quickly beset by ideological differences, including a divide between revolutionary ideologies, redistributive political ideologies, and single-interest politics (Armstrong, 2002). These ideological differences materialized in group conflicts over whether or not to support Black Panther activities, which led to permanent splits and the founding of the more moderate single-issue group the Gay Activists Alliance. The movement also faced ongoing disputes about the inclusion of transsexuals and drag queens, along with the capacity of the groups to address sexism and racism. By the early 1970s, the modern gay movement struggled to include diversity within the community; although the ideological emphasis of the movement was 'unity through diversity,' this diversity was often limited to sexual and ideological differences between white gay men (Armstrong, 2002).

During this time, many lesbians became involved in lesbian feminism rather than gay liberation. Lesbians formed lesbian feminist organizations, including the Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies Collective in Washington, DC, and the Gay Women's Liberation in San Francisco (D'Emilio, 1983). In the essays 'The Woman-Identified Woman,' the New York Radicalesbians attested that "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion." Many lesbians focused on building separate women-only communities rather than engaging with male-dominated gay liberation, although by the end of the 1970s some lesbians had pushed for more inclusion in the gay liberation movement, which was increasingly referred to as the 'gay and lesbian movement' (Armstrong, 2002). Toward the end of the 1970s, there was also a sudden