

## The Unifying Impact of the AIDS Epidemic

Bottles break, fires start, and a crowd hundreds strong chants, cheers, and boos. Drag queens resist arrest, gay men, lesbians, and trans people riot against a police line, and cops barricade themselves in a gay bar. Whether or not these people know it, they are making history, the sound of their boisterous intonations reverberating through the timeline of queer people in America. This is the night of June 28th, 1969, on a street in lower Manhattan, at the now-historic Stonewall Inn.

While the Inn, lacking a liquor license and being a gay bar in the 60s, was raided regularly by police, the raid that night had been unexpected. Even more unexpected was the violent fallout of that raid, as years of anger and frustration finally found body and direction. The sizeable gay (and to a lesser extent, lesbian and trans) community surrounding Stonewall decided in that moment that enough was enough. Instead of begrudgingly submitting to the authority of the NYPD, the crowd that night reacted with a fervor and power that had never been seen out of the gay community before at that scale. The riots continued for days, and headlines broke in the subsequent days and weeks about the nearly unprecedented response seen at Stonewall (“Stonewall Riots”).

While the riots were far from the first major moment in the history of gay liberation in the United States--and they were far from the last--they provide a useful prologue to the story of the next decade of gay rights activism, with their anger and their relentless approach to being recognized. No more would activists picket quietly: yelling, swearing, and getting in the public’s face was the new tune of gay liberation, as exemplified by the early Gay Liberation Front, and later the Gay Activists Alliance (Marotta 427-8). This scene lasted throughout the 1970s, though

the particulars changed with the years. It was not until the beginning of the 1980s that gay liberation would experience another shift so drastic, in the form of the AIDS epidemic. AIDS wracked the community at large, terrifying the nation and demonstrating just how important community and unity would be to all queer folk in the years to come. The transformative effect of the AIDS crisis throughout the 1980s and 90s rewrote the narratives of the gay and lesbian communities in an ink just as indelible as that of Stonewall, directing a far-reaching paradigm shift that united those disparate groups into the familiar LGBTQ collective we know today.

Before one can understand how AIDS changed gay and lesbian liberation, however, one must first understand the status quo throughout and at the close of the 1970s. Lesbian liberation is perhaps even more vital to examine than gay liberation, as much changed throughout the decade. The lesbian liberation movement began the decade even closer to nonexistence than gay liberation; not so much because there was no activism but rather because lesbians had little to no distinct political presence from gay people. As Carl Wittman puts it in his oft-read “A Gay Manifesto,” published in 1970: “We look forward to the emergence of a lesbian liberation voice. The existence of a lesbian caucus within the New York Gay Liberation Front has been very helpful in challenging male chauvinism among gay guys, and anti-gay feelings among women’s lib” (300). Wittman also notes the problem of what he calls male chauvinism, though it could just as easily be called misogyny.

That misogyny is what led lesbian feminist Del Martin to publish her open letter “Good-Bye, My Alienated Brothers,” the same year that Wittman published his manifesto. Within, Martin expressed her disgust for the disregard with which the gay liberation movement was, by and large, treating the women’s rights movement. She stated that she would withdraw

her participation in gay liberation and confine herself to lesbian liberation and feminism, a sentiment that many lesbian activists soon began to echo, resulting in a notable—if not complete—divide between the movements by the end of the 70s (“A Chronology...” xxxvi-xxxvii; Gilmore and Collinson 163). This schism is well illustrated by the lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” Rich writes: “In defining and describing lesbian existence I would hope to move toward a dissociation of lesbian from male homosexual values and allegiances. I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly female experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences” (650). Lesbian feminism’s relationship to gay liberation was essentially characterized by what gay liberation couldn’t yet provide: activism targeting the oppression of lesbians not just as non-straight, but as non-male. This, compounded with the prevalence of misogyny in the gay rights movement, would keep the two movements at arm’s length from each other until the AIDS epidemic compelled them to unite once again.

For the part of gay liberation, the movement was, as previously noted, built on the tone of activism set by the Stonewall riots. The Gay Activists Alliance, which rose from the ashes of the short-lived Gay Liberation Front, was a solidly radical organization, advocating belligerent and passionate protest. The GAA engaged primarily in what they called “zapping,” which meant confronting politicians at town halls and press conferences and shouting pointed questions related to gay rights in an attempt to get the subject of the zapping to take a stance on the issue (Marotta 428). While the GAA disbanded in 1973, their tactics would be emulated by many of the gay liberation groups that followed. Publicity and visibility were the real goals of these

groups--forcing the general public to consider and discuss gay issues, rather than allowing them to languish (Marotta 430). There were several successes throughout the decade, perhaps most famously the election of Harvey Milk to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977 (“A Chronology...” xxxviii).

The 1980s heralded the beginnings of another paradigm shift in the form of gay activism with the advent of AIDS. In 1981, the first reports came in from Los Angeles of gay men being stricken with strange illnesses that were never seen in people so young and healthy, if they were ever observed at all. Lacking information and perspective, the medical community began to collectively refer to these cases as “Gay-Related Immune Deficiency,” or GRID (Brier 27). The disease proliferated rapidly throughout gay centers of community, especially San Francisco, and later, New York. In the documentary *We Were Here* about the AIDS epidemic in San Francisco, the HIV-positive artist Daniel Goldstein remarks on how common it was for gay men of the era to know countless people who lost their lives to AIDS; he himself lost two partners to the disease, as well as several close friends. What made the epidemic worse was the utter lack of meaningful government response to the epidemic. The only silver lining of the AIDS epidemic was, as will become evident, the unifying effect it had on the gay and lesbian communities, forcing them to develop infrastructure to care for their own in a time of intense adversity.

As the 1980s progressed, scientific knowledge on the HIV virus did as well—though it would not be called that until 1986. The virus itself was first isolated in 1984 by two separate labs working in parallel, one in France, the other in the U.S. (Brier 30). By this time it had become clear that AIDS was not just a gay disease; countless cases were documented in (most notably) intravenous drug users and people with hemophilia. This did nothing to dispel the social

stigma of the disease, however; AIDS was already firmly implanted in the media consciousness of the United States as a gay problem, and in a country that cared little about gay people, gay problems were destined to be met by gay solutions and gay solutions only (Brier 27-8). This willful ignorance is quite succinctly illustrated by a short film from Scott Calonico. Calonico pulls audio from several White House press briefings over a period of several years in the mid 80s, wherein journalist Lester Kinsolving questions Deputy Press Secretary Larry Speakes on the White House's position on AIDS. Speakes' responses are universally nonchalant, and Kinsolving's fellow press members can be heard laughing in the background in response to numerous small pieces of biting humor from Speakes. The message of Calonico's film is clear: whether or not the Reagan administration did anything to prevent the spread of AIDS—which they did, but too little and too late, as the prevalence of community-organized organizations attests—they did not comprehend the struggles nor the humanity of the gay community.

This brazen lack of response from the U.S. government left the gay community with one method of recourse: they either had to form AIDS care organizations of their own, or watch their friends, brothers, and lovers die. And organize they did: the community addressed AIDS “in three distinct ways: first by trying to imagine new communal practices, both sexual and social, to confront AIDS; second by creating networks to provide services for people with AIDS; and third by launching criticisms of various segments of society from the federal government to the gay community itself for failing to address the epidemic” (Brier 28).

Of particular interest to this discussion are several organizations that engaged in everything from medical care to lobbying government. One such healthcare organization that sprung up from the fertile ground of the San Francisco gay community was the Women's AIDS

Network (WAN). The WAN is of special note due to its largely feminist and lesbian organizers (though there were numerous straight women involved as well). Coming into its prime in 1984, the WAN “recognized that [women’s] history of activism could provide gay men with a powerful example of what a social movement should look like,” and set about providing care for AIDS victims both male and female. While the vast majority of WAN patients were gay men, it is important to remember that lesbians especially were easily victimized by the disease for many of the same reasons gay men were, though it was not nearly as prevalent in their communities. No matter the patients, though, the existence of the WAN and organizations like it were the first steps to reuniting the now long-estranged gay and lesbian liberation movements under the common banner of defending against AIDS (Brier 29).

To counteract the silence of the Reagan administration on the issue of AIDS, the gay community was deafening. Organized in 1987, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power—ACT UP—sprung from New York City onto the national stage. Immediately after its founding, ACT UP was on Wall Street, protesting:

Two weeks [after its founding], ACT UP held its first demonstration, targeting the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) sluggish drug approval process as well as the profiteering of pharmaceutical companies. Hundreds of AIDS activists tied up traffic on Wall Street for several hours and seventeen were arrested. When the FDA announced just weeks later that it would shorten its drug approval process by two years, CBS News anchor Dan Rather credited ACT UP. (Gould 35)

ACT UP continued its push for a government response to the AIDS epidemic throughout the tail-end of the 80s until the organization began to dissolve in the early 90s. But before it was

gone, ACT UP provided yet another common ground upon which to rebuild community between the gay and lesbian liberation movements. Countless lesbians were involved in the organization; though many of their fellows criticized them for wasting time and energy on what the critics saw as a men's issue, there were many more who felt that if they did not speak up for the gay community, they would feel the heat themselves, as "lesbians were frequently constructed by the media and the religious right as AIDS carriers, along with gay men; as well, lesbians, like gay men, were one of the groups being targeted by the right wing more generally" (Gould 37).

At the same time ACT UP was making waves, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) was trying to stem the tide of negative journalism that poured in throughout the decade on the subject of AIDS. Formed specifically to shut down anti-AIDS and anti-HIV+ speech and to promote positive representation in all media, GLAAD grew swiftly in the later years of the 1980s. GLAAD marked just one more space in which gay men and lesbians were collaborating to present a unified image to the public; a far cry from the political rift between the movements in the 1970s. (For instance, the National Gay Task Force, one of the advocacy organizations formed in the wake of the GAA, changed its name during this time to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, though it is today the National LGBTQ Task Force (D'Emilio 311).) GLAAD is also one of the few organizations born out of the AIDS crisis that still exists today. Since its humble beginnings as a team of activists restricted to New York City, it has grown to a massive and "professional, savvy media-advocacy organization," and now acts to promote positive representation not just of gay, lesbian, and HIV+ people but of bisexual, trans, and queer folk of every sort (Alwood 431).

Indeed, the growth of GLAAD mirrors the growth and continued unification of the gay and lesbian liberation movements through the 1990s and 2000s. Today journalists speak commonly of the LGBT or LGBTQ movements, but no gay or lesbian publication from the 60s, 70s, or 80s would ever be found using the terms. This unification is certainly a result of the countless AIDS service organizations that formed over the course of the epidemic—and those that still exist today, as the epidemic continues despite drugs that make living as an HIV+ person far more doable than during the 1980s. By giving the gay and lesbian communities a common exigency over which to bond, the AIDS epidemic encouraged the creation of a strong, unified front to present to a skeptical and apathetic public. The activism of that time has been and remains alive and well, though it takes different forms; pushing for equal marriage rights, equal opportunity in the workplace for trans folk, and, as ever, equal representation in the media. The storm of AIDS is far from over, but at least for the LGBTQ community at large, the worst is finally in the past.

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