The Stonewall Riots - 1969 — A Turning Point in the Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Liberation

Something unremarkable happened on June 27, 1969 in New York's Greenwich Village, an event which had occurred a thousand times before across the U.S. over the decades. The police raided a gay bar.

At first, everything unfolded according to a time-honored ritual. Seven plain-clothes detectives and a uniformed officer entered and announced their presence. The bar staff stopped serving the watered-down, overpriced drinks, while their Mafia bosses swiftly removed the cigar boxes which functioned as tills. The officers demanded identification papers from the customers and then escorted them outside, throwing some into a waiting paddy-wagon and pushing others off the sidewalk.

But at a certain point, the "usual suspects" departed from the script and decided to fight back. A debate still rages over which incident sparked the riot. Was it a 'butch' lesbian dressed in man's clothes who resisted arrest, or a male drag queen who stopped in the doorway between the officers and posed defiantly, rallying the crowd?

Riot veteran and gay rights activist Craig Rodwell says: "A number of incidents were happening simultaneously. There was no one thing that happened or one person, there was just... a flash of group, of mass anger."

The crowd of ejected customers started to throw coins at the officers, in mockery of the notorious system of payoffs - earlier dubbed "gayola" - in which police chiefs leeched huge sums from establishments used by gay people and used "public morals" raids to regulate their racket. Soon, coins were followed by bottles, rocks, and other items. Cheers rang out as the prisoners in the van were liberated. Detective Inspector Pine later recalled, "I had been in combat situations, but there was never any time that I felt more scared than then."

Pine ordered his subordinates to retreat into the empty bar, which they proceeded to trash as well as savagely beating a heterosexual folk singer who had the misfortune to pass the doorway at that moment. At the end of the evening, a teenager had lost two fingers from having his hand slammed in a car door. Others received hospital treatment following assaults with police billy clubs.

People in the crowd started shouting "Gay Power!" And as word spread through Greenwich Village and across the city, hundreds of gay men and lesbians, black, white, Hispanic, and predominantly working class, converged on the Christopher Street area around the Stonewall Inn to join the fray. The police were now reinforced by the Tactical Patrol Force (TPF), a crack riot-control squad that had been specially trained to disperse people protesting against the Vietnam War.

Historian Martin Duberman describes the scene as the two dozen "massively proportioned" TPF riot police advanced down Christopher Street, arms linked in Roman Legion-style wedge formation: "In their path, the rioters slowly retreated, but - contrary to police expectations - did not break and run ... hundreds ... scattered to avoid the billy clubs but then raced around the block, doubled back behind the troopers, and pelted them with debris. When the cops realized that a considerable crowd had simply re-formed to their rear, they flailed out angrily at anyone who came within striking distance.

"But the protestors would not be cowed. The pattern repeated itself several times: The TPF would disperse the jeering mob only to have it re-form behind them, yelling taunts, tossing bottles and bricks, setting fires in trash cans. When the police whirled around to reverse direction at one point, they found themselves face-to-face with their worst nightmare: a chorus line of mocking queens, their arms clasped around each other, kicking their heels in the air Rockettes-style and singing at the tops of their sardonic voices:

'We are the Stonewall girls

We wear our hair in curls

We wear no underwear

We show our pubic hair...

We wear our dungarees

Above our nelly knees!'

"It was a deliciously witty, contemptuous counterpoint to the TPF's brute force." (Stonewall, Duberman, 1993) The following evening, the demonstrators returned, their numbers now swelled to thousands. Leaflets were handed out, titled "Get the Mafia and cops out of gay bars!" Altogether, the protests and disturbances continued with varying intensity for five days.

In the wake of the riots, intense discussions took place in the city's gay community. During the first week of July, a small group of lesbians and gay men started talking about establishing a new organization called the Gay Liberation Front. The name was consciously chosen for its association with the anti-imperialist struggles in Vietnam and Algeria. Sections of the GLF would go on to organize solidarity for arrested Black Panthers, collect money for striking workers, and link the battle for gay rights to the banner of socialism.

During the next year or so, lesbians and gay men built a Gay Liberation Front (GLF) or comparable body in Canada, France, Britain, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Australia, and New Zealand.

The word "Stonewall" has entered the vocabulary of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered (LGBT) people everywhere as a potent emblem of the gay community making a stand against oppression and demanding full equality in every area of life.

The GLF is no more, but the idea of Gay Power is as strong as ever. Meanwhile, in many countries and cities the concept of "gay pride" literally marches on each year in the form of an annual Gay Pride march.

The present generation of young LGBT people and many of today's gay rights activists were born or grew up after 1969. And over the intervening decades, politics in the U.S. have passed through a very different period. While there have been huge advances in the struggle for LGBT rights, there is still a long way to go to achieve full liberation as the growing attacks by the religious right makes very clear.

**Developing Subculture**

Why did the Stonewall events happen when they did? How did the initial actions of fewer than 200 people lead to both a wider protest and then the birth of Gay Liberation?

In his 1983 book Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities, the historian John D'Emilio has revealed the pre-history of Stonewall. The author shows how the process of industrialization and urbanization, and the movement of workers from plantations and family farms to wage labor in the cities, made it easier for Americans with same-sex desires to explore their sexuality. By the 1920s, a homosexual subculture had crystallized in San Francisco's Barbary Coast, the French quarter of New Orleans, and New York's Harlem and Greenwich Villages.

People with same-sex desires have existed throughout history. What has varied is the way society has viewed them, and how the people we now describe as LGBT regarded themselves at different stages.

The significance of the social change described above, and the emergence of a subculture, for the development of a gay rights movement is that an increasing number of individuals with same-sex desires were able to break out of isolation in small and rural communities. However discreetly, they learned of the existence of large numbers of other gay people and started to feel part of a wider gay community.

In society at large, the penalties for homosexuality were severe. State laws across the country criminalized same-sex acts, while simple affectionate acts in public such as two men or women holding hands could lead to arrest. Even declaring oneself as a gay man or lesbian could result in admission to a mental institution without a hearing.

Within the embryonic subculture, there were fewer places for lesbians than gay men because women generally had less economic independence, and it was therefore harder for a woman to break free from social norms and pursue same-sex interests. During the Second World War, all this changed. With the set routines of peacetime broken, gays and lesbians found more opportunities for freer sexual expression.

Women entered both the civilian workforce and the armed services in large numbers, and also had new-found spending power with which to explore their sexuality. In the documentary film Before Stonewall, a lesbian ex-servicewoman called Johnnie Phelps relates how she was called in with another female NCO to see the general-in-command of her battalion - which she estimated was "97% lesbian."

General Eisenhower told her he wanted to "ferret out" the lesbians from the battalion, and instructed her to draw up a list to that end. Both Phelps and the other woman politely informed the General that they would be pleased to make such a list, provided he was prepared to replace all the file clerks, drivers, commanders, etc. and that their own names would be at the top of the list! Eisenhower rescinded the order. A few years later as U.S. president, however, Eisenhower would get lists aplenty during the McCarthy witch-hunts that were unleashed against thousands of both suspected Communists and "sexual perverts."

**Renewed Repression**

With the return to peacetime conditions, the millions of Americans who had encountered gay people and relationships in the services or war economy saw this temporary opening-up of U.S. society come to an end. Most of the new wartime gay venues closed their doors, as service people were demobilized and the bulk of the new women workers were sent home from the factories.

The lid of sexual orthodoxy came crashing down, and a dark age was about to dawn for gay people. But the genie of lesbian and gay experimentation had been let out of the bottle. Things could never be quite the same again. One of the enduring effects of the war was the large number of lesbian and gay ex-service people who decided to stay in the port cities to retain some sexual freedom, away from their families and the pressure to marry.

In the 1940s and 1950s, post-war reconstruction and the shift to consumer production, taking place against the background of the Cold War, resulted in the authorities heavily promoting the model of the orthodox nuclear family to buttress the social and economic system of capitalism. The other side of the coin was a clampdown on those who stepped out of the magic circle of matrimony, parenthood, and homemaking by engaging in same-sex relationships.

The inquiries of the House Un-American Activities Committee led to thousands of homosexuals losing their jobs in government departments. The ban on the employment of homosexuals at the federal level remained in place until 1975. In the District of Columbia alone, there were 1,000 arrests each year in the early 1950s. In every state, local newspapers published the names of those charged together with their place of work, resulting in many workers getting fired. The postal service opened the mail of LGBT people and passed on names. Colleges maintained lists of suspected gay students.

**The Birth of Gay Rights**

It was against this hostile background that the gay rights movement in the U.S. came into existence. In 1948, Harry Hay, a gay man and long-standing member of the U.S. Communist Party (CP), decided to set up a homosexual rights group. This was the first chapter in what gay people at the time described as the "homophile" movement.

Like all Communist Parties around the world, the U.S. party claimed to uphold the tradition of the October Revolution in Russia. One of the early measures of the Bolsheviks had been to end the criminalization of gay people. But by the 1930s, the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy had resulted in the resumption of anti-gay policies both in the Soviet Union and world Communist Parties.

In this situation, determined to pursue his project, Hay asked to be expelled from the CP. In view of his long service, the party declined his request. Together with a small group of collaborators including other former CP members, Hay launched the Mattachine Society (MS) in 1950. This took its name from a mysterious group of anti-establishment musicians in the Middle Ages, who only appeared in public in masks, and were possibly homosexual.

D'Emilio describes the program of the Mattachine Society as unifying isolated homosexuals, educating homosexuals to see themselves as an oppressed minority, and leading them in a struggle for their own emancipation. The MS organized local discussion groups to promote "an ethical homosexual culture." These argued that "emotional stress and mental confusion" among gay men and lesbians was "socially conditioned."

Notwithstanding the Stalinist degeneration of the CP in which Hay had received two decades of training, the MS founders clearly applied Marxist methods to understand the position of gay people and chart a way forward. For the structure of Mattachine, Hay utilized the methods of secrecy which the CP had employed in the face of attacks by the authorities, but which also developed against the background of the undemocratic methods of Stalinism in the workers' movement.

To combat the persecution facing gay people, the Mattachine Society was based on a network of cells arranged in five tiers, or "orders." Hay and the other leaders comprised the fifth order, but would be unknown to members at first and second "order" levels. For three years, the MS steadily expanded its network of discussion groups. Growth accelerated in 1952 after MS won a famous victory over the police when charges against a Mattachine member in Los Angeles were dropped, following a campaign of fliers by a front organization called the "Citizens Committee to Outlaw Entrapment."

However, the following year, after a witch-hunting article by a McCarthyite journalist in Los Angeles, the fifth order decided to organize a "democratic convention." When this took place, the Hay group was criticized from the floor by conservative and anti-Communist elements who demanded that the MS introduce loyalty oaths, which was a standard McCarthyite tactic. The radical leadership managed to defeat all the opposition resolutions, and the demand for a loyalty oath never gained a majority in Mattachine.

Nevertheless, Hay and his comrades decided not to stand for positions in the organization they had established and built. This effectively handed the group over to the conservatives. Many who had supported the original aims left in disgust, and it took two years for the membership to be built up again. If the Hay group had stayed active, it could have offered a pole of attraction for militant LGBT people. As it was, the movement was thrown back and a decade was lost.

Whereas the Mattachine founders had advocated an early version of "gay pride," the new leadership reflected the social prejudice prevalent against homosexuals. The new MS president, Kenneth Burns, wrote in the Society journal, "We must blame ourselves for our own plight ... When will the homosexual ever realize that social reform, to be effective, must be preceded by personal reform?"

The position of the new leadership was that gay people could not fight for changes in U.S. society but had to look to "respectable" doctors, psychiatrists, etc. through whom to ingratiate themselves with the authorities in the hope of more favorable treatment. But the problem was that the vast majority of such figures advocated the idea that homosexuality was a sickness.

Towards the end of this period, when a professional named Albert Ellis told a homophile conference that "the exclusive homosexual is a psychopath," someone in the audience shouted: "Any homosexual who would come to you for treatment, Dr. Ellis, would have to be a psychopath!"

**The Rise of Gay Activism**

It is thought that many LGBT people who had yet to "come out" (publicly identify themselves as homosexual) became workers in the black civil rights campaign that began in the 1950s. By the following decade, the influence of the civil rights movement was making itself felt within the homophile movement. The "accommodationist" establishment of people such as Burns increasingly came under attack from a fresh generation of militant activists.

Eventually, in both the Mattachine Society and a similarly conservative lesbian group called the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the leadership chose to dissolve the national structure rather than see the organization fall into the hands of radicals. Individual MS and DOB branches then continued on a free-standing basis. In these and other city-based groups, militant leaders managed to win majorities, often after colossal battles.

Within this process, an influential figure was astronomer Frank Kameny, who had been fired from a government job in the anti-gay purges. After unsuccessfully fighting victimization in the courts, he concluded that the U.S. government "had declared war on" him and decided to become a full-time gay rights activist. Kameny was scathing about the old leadership of the homophile movement in their craven deference towards the medical establishment: "The prejudiced mind is not penetrated by information, and is not educable." The real experts on homosexuality were homosexuals, he said.

Referring to the organizations of the black civil rights movement, Frank Kameny noted: "I do not see the NAACP and CORE worrying about which chromosome and gene produced a black skin, or about the possibility of bleaching the Negro." As the struggles of U.S. blacks produced slogans such as "Black is Beautiful," Kameny coined the slogan "Gay is Good" and eventually persuaded the homophile movement to adopt this in the run-up to Stonewall.

The militant homophile campaigners started public picketing with placards and other direct actions, and mounted an offensive against the police and government over criminal entrapment, the employment ban, and a range of other issues.

Twenty years after Harry Hay had first conceived the idea of the Mattachine Society, U.S. society had undergone a transformation. The rise of a women's movement (with lesbians prominent among the organizers), the shift among black people from a civil rights to a black power movement (parts of which embraced socialist ideas), a revolt against the U.S. war in Vietnam on American campuses influenced by the May 1968 events in France, plus the side effects of other developments such as a rebellion against establishment values in dress and personal relationships among groups such as the hippies, all contributed to gay and lesbian rights campaigns moving into a more militant phase.

One of the strands within the Gay Liberation Front argued that a revolutionary struggle against capitalism to build a socialist society was needed to finally end the oppression of gay people.

Craig Rodwell concludes: "There was a very volatile active political feeling, especially among young people ... when the night of the Stonewall Riots came along, just everything came together at that one moment. People often ask what was special about that night ... There was no one thing special about it. It was just everything coming together, one of those moments in history that if you were there, you knew, this is it, this is what we've been waiting for."