

STONEWALL RIOTS



Reclaiming our Radical Roots

Credit: Ted Eytan.

By Jo Trigilio

The Stonewall Riots. What a perfect story to serve as the legendary origin of the US LGBTQ movement. Set in a time during which homosexual sexual activity and cross-dressing were criminalized offenses, it's a narrative of courage, resistance, unity, and communal support across differences. We have all heard the story. A little after 1:00AM on June 28, 1969, the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in New York City was raided by the police, as it often was. The Stonewall Inn, owned by the Genovese crime family, catered to a racially mixed, marginalized population that included drag queens, butch dykes, transsexuals, homeless gay youth, and LGBT sex workers. Everyone in the bar was initially held, then most were released one by one after producing an ID. The only people who were usually arrested were gender variant individuals who were not wearing three items of gender appropriate clothing, LGBT street youth who did not have IDs, and the employees for selling alcohol without a license.

During the raid, a crowd gathered outside the Stonewall, many waiting for their friends to come out, cheering each time a "released" patron emerged from the bar. Provoked by the sight of seeing some of their drag queen and butch lesbian friends forced into the paddy wagon, the mood switched from festive to angry. Who threw the first penny, punch, stone, or brick is a matter of dispute. What is indisputable is that those on the front lines, those who were brave enough to fight back at the risk of their own welfare, were those who were most disadvantaged, those who experienced multiple forms of oppression, those who endured the most number of social injustices. Over the course of five days and nights, thousands of people participated in the ongoing riot.

The diversity of the participants responding to a clear injustice permits an elastic narrative of inclusion. We can all see ourselves represented in the origin story. And this is where the story ends for most people.

What happens next is not as well known. It's the part of the story during which our racially diverse crew of heroic drag queens, transsexuals, butches, sex workers, and homeless youth fall out of the narrative and disappear. In recent years, drag queens and trans and gender variant people of color have complained that the US LGBTQ Movement, catalyzed by the Stonewall Riots, was quickly co-opted by white gay men, effectively silencing the voices and ignoring the needs of the most oppressed among the LGBTQ population. Why, for the past 50 years, have the voices and needs of the most disadvantaged been muted in favor of the most advantaged? What else have we forgotten and ignored about the roots of our movement? Celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots provides us with the opportunity to re-center the needs of the most disadvantaged among us by reclaiming the original organizing principle of the Gay Liberation Movement: Because oppressions are interlocked, no one is free until we are all free.

In truth, the Stonewall Riots merely serve as the mythical beginning of the LGBTQ movement in the US. By 1969, many gay activist groups were in place in the US. For at least a decade, gay, trans, lesbian, and gender variant people had been engaging in protests and activist activities, including resisting police harassment in bars and nightclubs. The kindling had been collected for more than a decade. Stonewall was the spark that happened to start the fire, pushing the nascent gay movement out from behind closed doors of secret meetings, out of the underground of informal networks, out of the darkness of the nightlife, and into the streets. Those who, due to their visible gender variance and racialization, were never in the closet, pushed the gay movement out of the closet.

In 1969, open resistance, demonstrating on the streets, in effect, coming out, were radical acts. The bold and brave acts of the riot participants inspired and motivated radicals who had been engaging in protest actions of black liberation, women's liberation, and counter-cultural movements, and radicalized countless others who had heretofore been too afraid to act. The New York Gay Liberation Front, formed days after the riots, modeled itself on the radical liberation movements of the day. Gay Liberation Front groups sprang up in cities and college campuses across the US.

Unlike civil rights approaches focused on reforming the system, the Gay Liberation Front sought to challenge "the power establishment"—a system structured by interlocking forms of racism, sexism, classism, imperialism, and heterosexism. Heavily influenced by the New Left Movement, the Gay Liberation Front was not concerned with acceptance and tolerance. Instead, it sought to create an alliance of the oppressed to overthrow the socially, economically, and politically unjust capitalist power establishment. According to journalist Allen Young, "Gay liberation [had] a perspective for revolution based on the unity of all oppressed people — that is, there

can be no freedom for gays in a society which enslaves others through male supremacy, racism, and economic exploitation (capitalism)." Those in the Gay Liberation Front understood themselves as part of a coalitional network that included women's, black, and Chicano liberation groups. They challenged the institutionalized patriarchal, heterosexual, nuclear family and the mandated gender roles required to support it. The goal was to construct new institutions through the kind of participatory democracy that gave voice to the most powerless.

By the end of the first year, the Gay Liberation Movement began to fracture along two lines. One schism was between liberationists who were concerned with a wide spectrum of interconnected social injustices, and assimilationists who wanted to focus on legislative efforts related only to gay rights. Assimilationist strategies rely

on "we are just like you, so we deserve equal rights" messaging. This single-issue approach works best for the most advantaged among us and fails to address the needs of LGBTQ people who experience multiple forms of oppression, like transwomen of color.

The second schism occurred along gender lines. Lesbians, especially those who identified

as feminists, felt excluded by male-centered agendas that ignored gender oppression. For lesbians and bisexual women, sexual oppression intersects with gender oppression in a way that is not separable.

In both cases, the issues of gender variant people (i.e., butches, drag queens, transpeople, etc.), especially as they intersect with race and class, were lost in the fissure. The liberationist approach was soon superseded by the mainstream Gay Movement, led predominantly by white, middle-class, gay men. The very people who risked their welfare to bravely resist were, in short order, cast to the margins of the movement.

The best way to celebrate the courageous acts of those on the front lines of the Stonewall Riots is to reclaim and revive the radical roots of the US LGBTQ movement. If we are truly committed to social justice and ending the oppression of all LGBT people, we must reconstruct a more inclusive, broad-based movement that centers the multiple needs of the most disadvantaged. In doing so, we attend to everyone's liberation.

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