

The Impact of the Stonewall Riots on American Society and Politics

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For decades, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender community, also more commonly referred to as the “LGBT community”, was impelled to live a life of oppression that was conceived by the homophobia in the American society. From the common citizens to the law enforcement and the political leaders of the country, people viewed homosexuality as unnatural, sinful, and felonious and did everything in their power to ridicule and eliminate the community of its entirety. Despite the discriminative backlash, the gays fought back to finally bring equality and justice to their name. By the early 20th century, the gay community began to form movements, protests, and organizations to fight for their rights; however, it was not until the Stonewall Riots of June 1969 did the gay community finally generate the spark to create an effective and revolutionary gay liberation movement. The riots at the Stonewall Inn became a symbol of gay reformation as they brought significant change to how homosexuality was perceived and redefined into society. Additionally, they also became the wakening call to a few of the most influential movements in LGBT history as well as the platform that politicians used to create laws that pushed the country into the direction for homosexual equality. Ultimately, the Stonewall Riots affected the society and politics of American history as it was the symbolic movement that strengthened gay empowerment and kickstarted the fight for LGBT rights in the United States.

The setting of the revolutionary riots took place at the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located in the Greenwich Village of New York City. In the city of New York as well as other places in the United States, homophobia and heterosexism existed in the streets. With “every state except Illinois [carrying] sodomy laws that prohibited nonvaginal intercourse”, “the medical community [condemning] homosexuals as mentally ill”, and “police officers [practicing] the art of

entrapment to tease the offending gays out of the crowd”, the public was an oppressive environment that became deleterious to the everyday lives of the gay community (Bausum 3-15). Due to the overwhelming amount of injustice and discrimination bestowed by the public, the Stonewall Inn ultimately became a sanctuary for the local homosexuals. The bar “served as a space for gays to meet, dance together, and express their physical attractions. It provided a showplace for cross-dressers to camp it up in their finery. It was a spot to hang out with other people who understood what it felt like to be gay on the cutting edge of changing times” (Bausum 3). However, despite the positive environment that it promoted, the Stonewall Inn mustered some negative effects; it was “run by the Mafia” and was “the headquarters for other illegal activity”, meaning that encounters with the law enforcement were predestined (Teal).

The conflict involving law enforcement and the Stonewall Inn only brought more evolving anger in the gay community. Being a Mafia-owned business, “there was that collision between the cops and the mobs, and the [gays] were... caught in the middle all the time.” Though the encounters of the Mafia and the law enforcement typically only involved “the police [getting] paid off by the club, the standard practice for lesbian and homosexual clubs in New York City”, the police used this connection to the homosexuals to their advantage (Carter 78). With that connection, the police “raided the bars” and arrested homosexuals “to enforce laws that prohibited various aspects of homosexual behavior” (Bausum 5). The act of the Mafia payoffs and the homosexual raids eventually became a routine for the Stonewall Inn: “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” (Wright). However, the unjust incarceration of the homosexuals on a frequent basis began to damage and wear out the gay community; it was only a matter of time until they were provoked to fight back.

On June 28, 1969, the inevitable happened; the gays fought back. In the early hours of that morning, the gays at the Stonewall Inn faced their final straw when the paddywagons of the police arrived at the bar and “three of the more blatant queens—in full drag—were loaded inside, along with the bartender”, the “doorman”, and “a dyke” (Wolf). At that moment, the gays responded “by throwing beer cans and bottles” at the police, ultimately starting the riot “which lasted two nights” with “a crowd of 2,000 [battling] 400 policemen” (Dudley 248). During these riots, some of the gay community fought peacefully. For example, “on the boarded-up front window [of the Stonewall Inn], anonymous protesters had sprawled signs and slogans” that advocated for gay power. Additionally, “newly emboldened same-gender couples were seen holding hands as they anxiously conferred about the meaning of these uncommon new assertions” (Duberman 202). However, most of the community fought back with violence. John O’Brien, who took part in the riots, stated, “Our goal was to hurt the police... I wanted to kill those cops for the anger I had in me. And the cops got that. And they were lucky that door was closed, they were very lucky” (Bausum 49). The Tactical Patrol Force eventually brought an end to the uprising after two days of the consecutive rioting. Though the riots ended, its legacy continued to flare; this was the first time in history in which homosexuals defied and fought against authority for the sake of gay rights. The incident on that fateful morning became known as Stonewall Riots, the symbolic movement that became the turning point for gay liberation.

The Stonewall Riots redefined the way homosexuality was presented in American society as it inspired the gay community to finally take pride in their sexuality. In the years preceding the riots, expressing public affection towards a significant other was avoided by the gay community at all costs. Because “the effect of the entire body of laws and policies that the state employed to police the conduct of homosexual men and women was to make being gay de facto a crime” (Carter 16), “many gay and lesbians remained closeted or invisible for fear of persecution or harassment” (“Gay & Lesbian Pride & Politics”). Though the mental and physical imprisonment of sexual and romantic expression plagued the gay community, it began to cease after the events of the Stonewall Riots. The riots liberated gay empowerment as it inspired gay men and lesbians to finally defy society’s standards of heteronormativity and motivated “radicalized gay activists” to “[stress] disclosing one’s gayness to non-gay people” (“Stonewall and the Politics of Memory”). With the newly found mindset of empowerment, “gay men and women were affectionate out in the open: holding hands, hugging, kissing, right in the streets” for the “first time in anyone’s memory” (“The Stonewall Riots”). Furthermore, during the march on Christopher Street, a gay march that celebrated “the one-year anniversary of the Stonewall riots” and became the “first Gay Pride march in U.S. history” (“The beginning of Pride”), “each gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender participant [proclaimed]: ‘I am out’”, a phenomenon that had never occurred before in the history of the LGBT movement (Bausum 76). Eventually, because of Stonewall, “being gay became something to celebrate, to share, to enjoy.” Soon, emerging out of the fear of harassment, gay pride and culture became apparent in society: “gay bars sprang up that [were not] run by the Mafia”, “gay bathhouses flourished”, and “gay attire ran the gamut from straight to hippie to biker-black leather” (Bausum 80). Due to the empowerment that

Stonewall developed for the community, gay men and lesbians were finally able to reveal their identity and sexuality in a way that was once considered an unspeakable act; thus, the Stonewall Riots ultimately liberated homosexual expression and brought pride within the gay society.

Furthermore, the riots also affected homosexual society as it redefined its frail identity into one that was more militant and radical for gay equality. Prior to Stonewall, homosexuals were associated with stereotypes that were often mocked and looked down upon by the homophobic community. To many, homosexuals were “morally weak and psychologically disturbed” (“History of... Sexual Orientation”). Additionally, homosexuals were thought to be “‘weak’ or ‘soft’”, characteristics that, according to the homophobic community, “are something to ridicule” (Gregory 27). However, once homosexuals broke out their aggression and rioted at the Stonewall Inn, the stereotype of their lack of strength and dignity was suppressed; according to poet Allen Ginsberg, “they lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago” (Montgomery). Above all, Stonewall gave birth to the gay community’s new and assertive identity. After the riots, homosexuals distinctly presented themselves to be more authoritative and combative when it came down to the progression of gay rights and equality. Many gays believed that “if the homosexual is to make any progress, ‘the entire existing social/political/economic establishment must be overthrown—possibly with force’” (Duberman 225). Inevitably, this new mindset of the community was most predominantly seen in the meetings and events held by gay organizations. For example, discussing the Stonewall Riots at a meeting, a heterosexual member in one of the organizations spoke, “‘Oh, we should be nice. Gay people are known as being nice, sweet people!’” However, the rest of the gay members exclaimed, “‘No! This has all got to change. It’s time to get radical... We have to be militant,

and we have to confront the authorities” (Carter 210). Additionally, these organizations claimed that ““homosexuals are no longer going to sit back and be apathetic pawns for every politician who comes along”” (Carter 215). The gay community eventually took this new mindset into action as they openly and pridefully fought back against the authority and the system for the first time in the gay liberation movement; they fought “against religious conservatives”, “governing bodies that still discriminated based on sexual orientation”, “ignorance within the straight community”, and “the fears that still kept many individuals in the closet” (Bausum 81) by “[organizing] protests and direct actions to pressure politicians [and people outside their community] to support gay rights” (O’Brien). With the uprising at Stonewall presenting a spirit of assertive radicalization, the gay community transformed into a society much more bold and aggressive for the sake of homosexual equality.

The Stonewall Riots influenced the uprising of many organizations that became significant in the fight for gay equality as they affected the way homosexuality was managed in society and politics; among these organizations was the Gay Liberation Front, also known as the GLF. The Gay Liberation Front was “a loosely structured group of gay rights activists who were interested in the radical sexual liberation of all people” and were devoted to “[integrating] gays and lesbians into society” (“Finding aid of the Gay Liberation Front”). However, the Gay Liberation Front would not have existed if it was not for the inspiration and boldness that was presented in the Stonewall Riots. The Stonewall Riots were fundamentally “the eruption after 20 years of trickling progress by small handfuls of [gay] men and women” that eventually “evolved into a full-blown organization, the Gay Liberation Front” (Wolf). The impact that the riots had on the GLF were present since the day the organization was publicized; when the GLF made

their debut in an interview, they claimed, ““We formed after the recent pig bust of the Stonewall, a well known gay bar in Greenwich Village. We’ve come to realize that all our frustrations and feelings of oppressions are real. The society has [screwed] with us... within our families, on our jobs, in our education, in the streets, in our bedrooms; in short, it has shit all over us”” (Carter 220). Further expanding on their influence of Stonewall, “their first march”, which kickstarted the group’s active advocacy for gay rights, “was on the one month anniversary of the riots”, celebrating and embracing the legacy the riots left on the community (Teal). With such influence from the riots, the GLF eventually became a significant organization in the fight for gay rights and equality. The GLF became the first organization that “openly claimed the word ‘Gay’” and was also responsible for “[organizing] marches”, “fund-raising dances, consciousness-raising groups, and radical study groups”, and “[publishing] their own newspaper” to vocalize the movement for gay equality (“Gay Liberation Front”). As the militancy in the Stonewall Riots assembled such influence onto the group, the Gay Liberation Front became a remarkable organization that bestowed significant contributions to the fight for homosexual equality.

Likewise, the Gay Activists Alliance, also known as the GAA, also became an important organization in the gay liberation movement with its influence from the Stonewall Riots. Similarly to the Gay Liberation Front, the goal of the Gay Activists Alliance was to bring equality to the gay community; however, the GAA “became more influential in the [gay liberation] movement” as it focused on specifically on the gay minority instead of the “coalitions with other progressive groups” (Dudley 249). Being a major influence in the gay liberation movement, it is clear that the Gay Activists Alliance was motivated by the desire for equality that was present during the Stonewall Riots. Essentially, “it was the Stonewall Riots that resulted

in the birth of... the Gay Activists Alliance” as it “inspired thousands of gay men and lesbians around the country—and ultimately around the world—to join the movement for gay civil and human rights” (Carter 2). Additionally, commenting on the influences of Stonewall, author and historian David Carter states, “Directly out Stonewall came a new kind of gay organization that was much more militant—... the Gay Activists Alliance... The Gay Activists Alliance found a way to not only preserve that energy [that came out of the Stonewall Riots] but to multiply it, making the [gay liberation] movement a mass movement and thereby giving it the power necessary to make political progress” (Errick). The militancy of the Stonewall Riots influenced the GAA to effectively challenge the heteronormativity present in American society and politics and radicalize them for the sake of homosexual equality. During its height in political activity, the GAA “lobbied for the passage of a gay rights bill in the City Council of New York”, “the enactment of fair employment and housing legislation”, “the banning of police entrapment and harassment of gays”, and “the repeal of state laws respecting sodomy and solicitation” (“Gay Activists Alliance”). Furthermore, “homosexuality was still recognized as a mental illness at this time until 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove it off the list, and the GAA played an enormous role to get that revoked” (Nie). With its spirit of radicalization, the Stonewall Riots had left a significant influence on the formation of the Gay Activists Alliance and its social and political actions to seek homosexual equality.

While the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliances were undoubtedly the most significant organizations in the gay liberation movement, the Stonewall Riots also inspired smaller organizations that were just as dedicated to seek change in America’s stance on homosexuality; one of these groups was the Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom. The Fort Hill

Faggots for Freedom “was a collective formed in Roxbury’s Fort Hill section in 1969 for draft resisters and their supporters” (“Remember Stonewall flyer”). Throughout the course of its activity, the group made it clear to the public that its major influence was the uproar at Stonewall. Their inspiration of the riots was most apparent in their flyers that attempted to draw public attention to Gay Pride Week; in their flyer entitled “Remember Stonewall!”, the group specifically wrote, “Gay Pride Week should reflect the spirit of Stonewall—to publicly celebrate gay sexuality and reclaim the right to self-expression of our bodies” (“Remember Stonewall flyer”). With the Stonewall Riots being their obvious source of empowerment, motivation, and boldness, the Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom contributed to the gay liberation movement by courageously challenging and defying society’s strict standards of masculinity and heterosexism; they crossdressed. The Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom were “a group of gay men” who advocated for sexual equality by “wearing wigs, dresses, rhinestones and lacy things” to agitate and threaten homophobic, straight males and their authority (“Drag”). With the act of their political drag, “the Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom zapped the dress code of one of Boston’s most ‘masculine’ bars” (Jay and Young 13). Though their impact in the gay liberation movement was not as significant as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance, they managed to make a mark on society’s perception of homosexuality by exemplifying the courage and power the gay community had within. With that being said, by using the militancy of the Stonewall Riots as the motor behind their activism, the Fort Hill Faggots for Freedom became an organization that provided empowerment and courage to gay liberation movement.

The Stonewall Riots were responsible for affecting and influencing American politics regarding laws on gay rights and equality; inevitably, they were responsible for influencing

Harvey Milk, a gay activist and politician who was most significant in aiding the fight against anti-gay laws and discrimination. In the year of 1977, “Harvey Milk was elected to the Board of Supervisors” and was “the first openly gay man elected to public office in the United States” (“Bringing People Hope”). During his time of activism, it was noticeable that the Stonewall was a major influence in much of Milk’s advocacy as he used the riots and its legacy as a way to empower his beliefs and motivate his followers. For example, in his “Hope Speech” delivered on June 25, 1978, Milk brought up his inspirations of the Stonewall Riots as he spoke:

On this anniversary of Stonewall, I ask my gay sisters and brothers to make the commitment to fight. For themselves, for their freedom, for their country... We will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets... We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I’m going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it.

You must come out... (Kowalski)

Taking inspiration from the unbreakable energy and spirit that was present by the Stonewall Riots, Milk was able to bring a driven and determined mentality to not only his followers but also the mindset behind his activism in politics regarding the gay liberation movement. For example:

in November 1978, he was confronted with a piece of anti-gay legislation known as the Briggs Initiative, or Proposition 6, which would bar gays from teaching in schools...

Milk understood that the only way to convince Californians that gays should not be fired simply because of their sexual orientation was for closeted gays to come out. Milk urged gays all over the United States to come out of the closet, even declaring, ‘If a bullet

should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door'. (“Bringing People Hope”)

Distinctly, Milk’s strategy of encouraging the gay community to come out of the closet and fight for their rights was inspired by Stonewall as the outbreak of the riots had “led many gays and lesbians to ‘come out of the closet’ and publicly assert their sexual identity” in order to “organize politically” (“Gay and Lesbian Liberation”). With the influence of Stonewall, Proposition 6 was vanquished by the gay community and its supporters, ultimately claiming Milk victorious in his battles with anti-gay laws and causing him to become a significant figure in the fight for gay equality in American politics.

Significantly, the Stonewall Riots motivated the fight for gay marriage equality in the political aspect of the United States. The idea that “marriage litigation was... ‘a path to [gay] liberation’” became a common thought within the gay community once the outbreak of the riots occurred (Boucai 5). As a matter of fact, “after Stonewall”, specifically “in the political realm”, one of the “main goals of the [gay liberation] movement” included “strengthening... calls for marriage equality” (Pierceson 30). The influence of the Stonewall Riots was prominent in the movement for the legalization of homosexual marriage as it created the spirit that called for rebellion and reformation regarding the heterosexism in society, the spirit that fundamentally kickstarted the first actions of the progression in the movement. Creating the spirit of the movement, “the Stonewall riots in New York City foreshadowed a sea change in the social status of homosexuals” in which “thousands of gays and lesbians marched out of their closets and challenged their outlaw status.” They “insisted that no state should no longer treat them as presumptive criminals and should, instead, treat them the same as it treated straight citizens.

Caught up in the excitement of the movement, [Jack] Baker and [Michael] McConnell applied for a marriage license in 1970”, ultimately becoming one of the first actions that finally sparked the movement (Eskridge and Spedale 5). Eventually, “within a year of Stonewall, activists (first in Minnesota, then Washington state, and Kentucky shortly thereafter) requested marriage licenses”, allowing for the rise of gay liberation activity in politics (Pierceson 32). Though these requests for marriage licenses were rejected due to the court’s claim that marriage “is and always has been recognised as the union of man and woman” (Boucai 3), the marriage equality movement and its major influence of Stonewall still did not cease to continue progressing politically. Continuously, the “activists were directly inspired by the... activism unleashed by Stonewall” as they attempted to reform state laws regarding same-sex marriage and convince politicians to agree on gay equality. For example, from taking Stonewall’s spirit of assertive reformation as inspiration and exhibiting it in the form of protests, they influenced “a reform of Washington, D.C.’s family law [that] resulted in the drafting of a gender-neutral marriage bill that activists hoped... would legalize same-sex marriage.” Additionally, during a debate in California regarding the state’s marriage statute, “some legislators recognized that cohabiting same-sex couples lacked basic legal protections and opposed the revisions” to officially ban homosexual marriage in the state (Pierceson 32). Though the progression of marriage equality was rather gradual, the fight for the legalization of gay marriage made a mark in American politics with the obvious inspiration of the Stonewall Riots.

Without a doubt, the society and politics of the United States were impacted by the rise of gay empowerment and the liberation movements that were influenced by none other than the Stonewall Riots and its legacy. For the first time in history, the homosexual community, with the

aid of the mindset that Stonewall created, was finally able to redefine themselves into a new identity that was presented in American society as bold and fearless. With these new militant identities, gay liberation organizations that adopted Stonewall as their most significant inspiration began to flourish, ultimately becoming influential themselves as they left remarkable impacts on the gay community and the progression of equality. Furthermore, the politics of America were ultimately affected as gay activists were finally motivated to advocate and fight for homosexual equality through the spirit of reformation that the Stonewall Riots had left on the gay community. With the major influences that its legacy had left in the United States, it is evident that the Stonewall Riots is truly the symbolic LGBT movement that was able to pave the pathway to justice for the gay community. Today, thanks to the riots and the revolutionary movement it sparked, the LGBT community is now more widely accepted in the United States than it has ever been before, and same-sex marriage is now legalized under the Equality Act of 2015. Though the LGBT community still has a long way to go to end homophobia and discrimination, it is without a doubt that the Stonewall Riots will never cease to influence the community and lead them into the direction of equality.

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