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‘They've lost that wounded look’: Stonewall and the struggle for LGBT+rights

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Stonewall Riots, a key episode in the struggle for LGBT+ rights. LGBT+ people in the USA in the 1960s were seen as a sick, and endured extreme state repression. The cost to isolated individuals, frequently rejected by their families, was devastating. Excluded from public sector jobs, criminalised, imprisoned, they were subjected to agonising ‘cures’ and persecuted by police. The paper explores the terrifying context and radicalising impact of the Stonewall Riots which erupted in New York in June 1969. That historic uprising transformed existing defence campaigns into a militant political movement for LGBT+ liberation and ignited an unstoppable 50-year fight against state repression and for equality. Inspired by the Black Panthers, the first ‘Gay Power’ militants envisaged a society not just tolerant of sexual and gender minorities, but transformed in its social attitudes towards homosexuality, bisexuality, and trans and genderfluid lives.

Introduction

The massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016 was a sharp reminder that LGBT+ people are on the receiving end of extraordinary levels of oppression. It’s not safe to walk the streets. Many avoid holding hands with their partner in public because of fear of violence. The UK government estimates there are 39,000 homophobic crimes every year in the UK, and the majority is not even reported. LGBT+ people are the largest single group affected by hate crime in the USA. Between 2008 and 2014, there were 1,612 trans individuals known to have been murdered across 62 countries - equivalent to a killing every two days. (www.stonewall.org.uk) One of Trump’s aims since becoming US president has been get transgender people banned from the American military.

Young people are frequently isolated and unsupported when they start to question their sexuality. In Britain, Thatcher’s notorious Section 28, which banned teachers from teaching same-sex relationships, was repealed in 2003. But where was the injection of resources to overcome the fear and silence engendered by gagging teaching mentioning LGBT+ rights? Today in the UK, half of LGBT+ pupils, including 64 per cent of trans pupils, are subjected to bullying in schools, and ninety per cent endure phobic remarks and slurs. Levels of self-harm and suicide attempts are alarming. (www.stonewall.org.uk) Oppression hurts. But few young people get the help they need because mental health services are expensive and hard to access. Austerity policies in Britain have seen £538m per year cut from public mental health budgets while 19,000 teenagers annually go for emergency treatment for self-harm. (Broomfield, 2017) Over 300 youth projects have been cut in London alone. Young LGBT+people are over-represented in youth homelessness figures; many are rejected by their families and end up staying on floors, hiding in workplaces overnight, or sleeping rough

- at great risk of violence and sexual exploitation. (Rutter, 2015) Health cuts and treatment charges block access to care for trans people, many of whom are driven to prostitution to fund the surgery they need. Support and self-help organisations work hard to mitigate the effects of this oppression, on pitiful resources.

Britain presents itself as a place of civilisation, equality and opportunity. Since 2010, thanks to grassroots campaigning over decades, people have been able to seek asylum in the UK if they face persecution in their home country because of their sexuality or their gender identity. (Travis and Hirsch, 2010). In 2017, it was revealed that "thousands of lesbians, gays and bisexuals have been refused asylum from countries where they could face prison, violence, or death. A total of 3,535 asylum applications were made by people fleeing persecution at least partly based on their sexual orientation … more than two-thirds of these were rejected." (Duffy, 2017)

> One lesbian asylum seeker was told she couldn't be gay because she has children, while another asylum seeker was compelled to show caseworkers explicit pictures of himself having gay sex to 'prove' his sexuality. Another … had his application challenged by the Home Office because he said the T in LGBT+ stood for 'Trans' as opposed to 'Transgender'. Many have been … told to go home and 'act straight'. (Duffy, 2017)

The examples above are from the UK and the US where on paper at least important LGBT+ rights have been won. There are still 72 countries which criminalise same-sex relationships; eight maintain the death penalty. Discrimination at work affects half the world. Most governments deny trans people the right to legally change their name and gender from those that were assigned to them at birth. A quarter of the world's population currently believes that being LGBT+ should be a crime. (www.stonewall.org.uk)

Given all this, it may be easy to lose sight of how far we have come. But in many parts of the world, LGBT+ people are now visible and accepted an integral part of multicultural society. In December 2017, Australia became the twenty-third country to legalise same-sex marriage after a mass, activist-led referendum campaign. Ireland, traditionally conservative on sexual questions, amazed the world with an overwhelming vote for same-sex marriage in 2015. Half the world lacks LGBT+ employment rights, but the other half enjoys the result of organised labour activists pushing for change over decades.

Hundreds of Pride events now take place around the world. Some in major cities like London, New York, and San Francisco are major tourist events, backed by banks and corporations. Other Prides defiantly reject commercialisation. Whatever the tone, millions of ordinary people attend Prides to defend and celebrate freedom of sexuality and gender expression, reminding us that, while well-meaning politicians have played their part in enshrining change, all these gains have been initiated and won by struggles from below.

Elsewhere, I have explored cultural and political questions in the fight for LGBT+ liberation, past, present and future. (Field, 2016) This paper focuses on a crucial historic event in this legacy of struggle: the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Stonewall was the crucible from which the Pride tradition was born - and the moment when the modern movement for LGBT+ liberation erupted into the political landscape.

Introduction: 'There wasn't any place for us to go'

LGBT+ people in 1960s America faced systematic, state-sponsored persecution, based on an official crackdown on homosexuals enforced at the end of WW2.

"So sharply was that line drawn – and so quickly did the impetus to police homosexuality explicitly rather than by proxy begin to spread across the federal bureaucracy, that it might seem as though a switch was suddenly thrown during the World War II period." (Canaday, 2009:138)

Activist Mark Segal, who was 18 in 1969, describes the prospects for a young American person coming to terms with their sexuality in that period:

> …if you were found to be a homosexual, you were a sinner in religious circles; you were a criminal in legal situations; you were insane in the psychiatric community; and you were unemployable by city, state and federal governments. Pretty much a life of condemnation awaited you. If people found out the word *homosexual* applied to you, chances were you would lose your job, your family, be subjected to electrical shocks, and lose everything else you valued, so most remained inside a closet within a closet. (Segal 2015: 25)

1960s America was seeing resistance, defiance and pressure for change; opposition to war, military conscription and the oppression people suffered on the basis of race, gender and class rising to the surface and urgently articulated. Gay activists were watching these upheavals. A national 'homophile' reform network called the Mattachine Society had been formed by LGBT+ radicals in 1950, and had campaigned successfully against police harassment, before being taken over by cautious conservatives during the McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunts later in the 1950s.

"They drastically revised the goals of the organisation, backtracking in every area. Instead of social change, they advocated accommodation. Instead of mobilizing gay people, they sought the support of professionals, who they believed held the key to reform. They stated, 'We do not advocate a homosexual culture or community, and we believe none exists.' The results were devastating … groups folded." (Roscoe, www.foundsf.org)

Co-founder Chuck Rowland also reflected on the retreat of Mattachine:

"To most of the people … the only way we were ever going to get along was by being nice, quiet, little boys that our maiden aunts would have approved of. We were not going to get along in the world by going out and flaunting our homosexuality. There were people of goodwill who would help us but we could not do anything naughty like having picket signs or parades. Only communists would do things like that. (Field, 2016:59)

Most recently, with a new generation of activists determined to step up the action, Mattachine Society New York (MSNY), led by new board members like Dick Leitsch, had revived its campaign over police brutality and publicly exposed the 'clean-up' policy of entrapment of gay men in sexual meeting places. Inspired by the Black Civil Rights movement there had also been a 'sip in' at city bars to publicise state laws banning the sale of alcohol to homosexuals. Frustration was growing; all the old formulations of pleading for justice were crumbling. (Carter, 2004: 46, 51)

So, at last, at the end of that decade of rage, a different form of resistance erupted, electrifyingly, one sultry weekend in June 1969, in a three-night riot against homophobic police harassment at a downbeat Mafia-run gay bar called The Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. Like the Black Power movement that inspired it, resistance against LGBT+ injustice arose from the people who suffered that injustice most sharply: from the poor, the working class, the oppressed.

The story of that rebellion is an exhilarating lesson in how to fight back against the forces of repression. It's also a chilling glimpse into the underworlds LGBT+ people, especially poor and disenfranchised LGBT+ people, are forced to inhabit when basic human and civil rights are withheld.

There are many accounts of Stonewall. What follows next is a critical selection from some of those accounts.

The birth of Gay Power

The Stonewall Inn was a tacky dive on Christopher Street near Sheridan Square, set up and owned by a mobster's son named Fat Tony, with $500 upfront investments from childhood friends Zookie Zarfas, who was in the firecracker business, Tony 'the Sniff' and 'Joey'. Even though it was on block allocated by the Mafia to Matty the Horse, who took a cut from the takings, the Stonewall was a huge money-spinner for all its investing partners because it was serving an outlaw clientele – lesbians and gays – to whom New York's State Liquor Authority (SLA) banned the sale of alcohol. Homosexuality itself was also illegal in all US states except Illinois, and the New York Police Department had closed down all the privately run bars in a 1960 crackdown. (Carter, 2004: 41) So LGBT+ people were Fat Tony's captive customers. What attracted the mainly male, mainly young punters, often ex-Vietnam veterans, was the unique atmosphere of the Stonewall as a dance palace. While dancing with members of the same sex wasn't illegal, touching while doing so, and kissing, were deemed disorderly under federal law; often in gay bars, strict rules on not getting too close were abusively enforced. When teenage sailor Danny Garvin first walked in to the Stonewall, he was shocked: "'Men don't dance with other men!' he thought. 'This will never last!'" But fellow patron Chris Babick was delighted. "'And when I saw there were several couples dancing together, I had such a thrill in my stomach, it was like… an electric shock. And it was so fucking exciting.'" (Carter, 2004: 71)

Perhaps light can be thrown on both these reactions to the sight of two men dancing by the almost total blackout of representations of homosexuality in the media. Before the arrival of television, one of America's biggest exports, motion pictures, picked up the flame-torch of moral squeamishness. Characters in American films had never been very positive exponents of LGBT+ life – gay men generally were ridiculed as effeminate, and lesbian women drawn as morbidly jealous. Most coded LGBT+ characters died, went mad or were doomed to loneliness. But things got worse. In 1930, to avoid outside censorship, the industry's public relations chief, Will Hays, introduced the self-regulatory Motion Picture Production Code, which, under the heading 'Sex', included the rules:

"The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing… Sex perversion

or any inference to it is forbidden… Miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden." (www.artsreformation.com)

"Sex perversion" meant homosexuality, and once the code was fully enforced in 1934, under pressure from the Catholic Church, LGBT+ lives were virtually eradicated from the most popular entertainment medium, except as coded figures of fun or danger.[1] The Hays code dominated until the late 1960s. (Russo, 1981:31)

There were two bars at the Stonewall. The front bar played mainstream hits like the Beach Boys, while the back room drew young people of all ethnicities and backgrounds with the heightened emotional sounds of Motown. The kids made up their own words to the songs, to make them more 'gay' and relevant to their lives. One former customer explains: "There was a sense of community feeling in the Stonewall. You would meet your friends there. It was a fun time, a good time… Gay people were different back then. Guys would ask you to dance." (Scherker 1988). Early gay activist Allen Young "preferred the more sedate [more masculine] alternatives and described the Stonewall as the "favourite hangout of the freest of the gay people – those most likely to be labelled 'fag' and 'drag queen'. (Carter 2004:74)

Many of those who frequented the Stonewall were vulnerable boys. The gay film historian Vito Russo described the place as "a bar for the people who were too young, too poor or just too much to get in anywhere else. The Stonewall was a street queen hangout in the heart of the ghetto."[2] (Russo 1981:164) It was a kind of refuge – shelter, at a price – for homeless youngsters who had run away from or been kicked out by their homophobic families, often because they were less masculine than their parents could tolerate, and had fled to the city to survive on the meagre proceeds of begging, drug-dealing, petty thieving and prostitution. (Carter, 2004) Drugs – uppers, downers, acid, marijhana - were also sold without restraint in the Stonewall. The young boys coped with kaleidoscoped hours, irregular diet and the degradation of having to sell their bodies by taking drugs to soothe themselves.

David Carter interviewed Bob Kohler, a gay New Yorker who, on walks down Christopher Street with his dog, befriended some of these kids, giving them money to buy snacks and hearing their stories. "One had an enormous burn scar covering his face and most of the rest of his body. His mother had decided she didn't want men to be 'tempted' anymore by her son's good looks and had held his face in the flames herself." Another "bore the impression of a clothes iron on one of his buttocks, also made by one of his parents. In other cases parents or other relatives had thrown boiling water on them." "[One boy] urgently said to Bob 'If only I could have my breakdown, then I know they would help me. They would always help my mother when my mother had her breakdowns. They would take her away and then she would come back and she'd be fine.'" The kids fought with one another, made up, helped and betrayed one another, and slept out in all weathers, using

[1] Vito Russo, The Celluloid Closet, Harper and Row, New York, 1981, p107

[2] The performative word 'queen' these days is usually used in the term 'drag queen' to describe someone who cross-dresses. But in the 1960s the word was usually used on its own to denote gay men who were not conventionally masculine in behaviour and dress. 'Drag queens' were often people we might call trans now. They might dress up occasionally in 'women's' clothes, perhaps just for prostitution, or live part or all of their lives with 'female' names and personas.

drugs and alcohol to get through the days and the nights. "Kohler recalls: 'Death was a very, very common thing. There were always bodies being fished out from the river." Bob let the youths walk his dog but he was under no illusions. "I used to watch because I thought they're either going to eat him or sell him… They were rotten kids. Of course they had been made rotten." (Carter 2004:58)

The official classification of homosexuality as a sociopathic deviance and mental illness, and popular fears that insanity was hereditary, add a further dimension to the epidemic of youngsters fleeing from homophobic families. The kids' parents were afraid of them, afraid of what having a homosexual child might do to their own already pressured lives. They may have been all too aware of what you were supposed to do with a gay kid:

"In the 1940s, homosexuals were … involuntarily committed to psychiatric facilities by their families, with the hospitals promising that the patient would [be] cured of their 'sexual illness.' Not only were they not allowed to leave, but they were often subjected to cruel and inhumane treatments, including castrations, torture drugs [emetics, hypnosis], shock therapy, and lobotomies." (Scot, 2017)

While individual family members and doctors with liberal attitudes may have offered varying levels of sympathy and support to individuals, overall, the experience of being accused of, or owning up to homosexual tendencies resulted in being labelled as suffering from sexual or social psychopathy, as classified by the American Psychiatry Association (APA). (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), 1952). Twenty states passed 'sex psychopath' laws which allowed detention on the basis of 'being' homosexual rather than actually committing any sexual act. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the 'treatments' specified above were used by American psychiatrists as 'aversion therapy', to 'cure' homosexuals. For those who couldn't afford residential options, an alarming array of electric shock-based alternatives were offered on the market. For example, the Visually Keyed Shocker, produced by Farrall Instruments, promised: "AUTOMATED BEHAVOUR CONDITIONING FOR: ADDICTION, MASOCHISM, ALCOHOLISM, AGGRESSION, TRANSVESTISM, EXHIBITIONISM and SEXUAL PREFERENCE". This apparatus consisted of slide projector complete with specially chosen 'stimuli' slides (according to the disorder) connected to an electric shock generator. The 'patient' would be shown neutral slides and when a stimulating slide was shown, for instance of a naked man, the generator would deliver a shock. The home shock machines were cheaper, because "the doctor's time is required only for the usual counselling session and not needed to continue the conditioning therapy." (Scot, 2017)

Perhaps for some parents, kicking the child out seemed the kindest option.

Because being exposed as gay could cost you your home, family, college education as well as your livelihood, bars like the Stonewall offered evenings of respite and release for LGBT+ people who were forced to hide their sexuality and pursue outwardly straight lives. This was the reality of living in the closet. The bars were somewhat safer from police harassment than the open-air cruising grounds, like the west side of Central Park. They provided meeting places away from deadly homophobic street attacks by gangs or vigilantes, and a little less risk of being honey trapped by undercover cops looking to up their arrest scores. Gay men have been criticised for promiscuity right the way through modern LGBT+ history, but like so many aspects of LGBT+ culture, the tradition of

anonymous sex was a direct product of state repression. Marle Becker was a frequenter of the men-only sexual orgies that took place in open trucks by the Hudson River, along the Village waterfront, but he says:

"'… we would have been happier checking into a hotel like any other couple… There wasn't any place for us to go. If you didn't have an apartment, or if you had roommates… [the only option] was to have sex in Central Park or the trucks… where hopefully you didn't get caught or arrested.' Even an invitation by another person to his place could be problematic: would the other person turn violent or turn out to be plainclothes policeman?" (Carter 2004:36)

But while it was a sort of haven, the club was by no means safe. There were no fire exits. The whole building was painted black inside and out, in a cut-price effort to cover over the scorches from a fire. The windows were boarded up. Ghostly memories of the building's former incarnation as The Stonewall Inn Restaurant were ever-present because the huge, heavy, rusting metal name-sign over the door had simply had the word 'Restaurant' lopped off. (Carter 2004: 67) "There was no running water to wash the glasses of watered-down booze and beer that were rinsed in a murky tub behind the main bar, leading to at least one outbreak of hepatitis" (Wolf 2009: 120). This tub was emptied down the toilets, frequently causing fetid floods. The front door had a sliding peephole, guarded by Blond Frankie whose unerring memory for faces could screen out strangers who might be unsuspecting heterosexuals or undercover cops: "This is a private club, for members only." Not that management cared about their customers. "They liked our money and hated our guts," said one former customer. (Craig Rodwell interviewed by Scherker, 1989). Once a punter had passed Blond Frankie's inspection, the door was opened and they would pass through to pay the bouncers the admission charge: $1.00 on a week night and $3.00 at the weekends.

As selling alcohol to homosexuals was illegal, Stonewall management pretended the bar was a private 'bottle club', where customers brought their own drinks, but all the names on tags tied to bottles on the bar top were made up by the bartenders. Staff sold drinks aggressively and expensively – a dollar apiece. The booze was mainly stolen or bootlegged via Matty the Horse. The cigarettes and jukebox records were also from Mafia suppliers (Carter 2004). The Stonewall took $5-6000 every Friday night (Wolf 2009). The mobsters' upfront investments were all made back on the first night it opened in March 1967. All the takings were kept in cigar boxes.

Like all Mafia operators, Fat Tony paid off the cops - around $1,200 or £500 weekly; (around $8,280 or £6,190 today).[3] (Wolf 2009:121) But even so, police staged raids on a regular basis to fulfil their obligations in upholding the law on alcohol sales, underage drinking, same-sex touching and crossdressing - all deemed disorderly by law. These raids took place in a predictable drill where plainclothes cops went in first to trap a few unsuspecting punters, then the uniforms followed. Club lookouts then sent warnings inside the club to stop the dancing - and the cops walked in. Employees would be arrested, and some of the customers also carted off in police wagons.

"Not only did such raids bring arrests, beatings and even rape, they often attracted widespread publicity with the names and addresses of those involved printed in the local papers." (Dee, 2010)

[3] These figures are based on calculations from several money calculator websites, including worth.com and fxtop.com.

The management used their own lawyers to get everyone out - lawyers who imposed high fees when any individuals went to them for help - and the venue usually opened up the next night. The ritual humiliation also carried additional risks for those who had a job or a family to lose. Around 10,000 LGBT+ Americans lost their jobs over forty years following President Eisenhower's essentially redbaiting 1953 rule that homosexuals were a threat to American security. In his view, lesbians and gays were tantamount to communists, and therefore unfit for work for the government.[4] (www.thelavenderscare.com)

Police pressure had been very severe all the way through the 1950s and 1960s, but in New York the harassment became much more intense in the run-up to the 1964-5 World's Fair, a festival for American corporations bent on foreign expansion. In 1963, under Mayor Robert Wagner, the city authorities began a concerted effort the make homosexuals, homeless people and prostitutes invisible to the public eye – by force. This set in motion a police habit of entrapment and attacking and closing homosexual gathering-places in Greenwich Village. By 1969 this was a sickeningly familiar occurrence. (Carter 2004: 18)

The police had come a cropper on this mission early in 1966 when spontaneous resistance to their bungled repressive tactics ended in a street protest:

"New York's highest-ranking uniformed officer … ordered fourteen blocks around McDougal Street closed to traffic on a Friday night, a peak time for the rowdy youths who came to enjoy the nightlife. Soon 1500 were sitting in the middle of the empty streets, clapping and chanting, 'Up with the Village and down with the police!'… The press had a field day mocking the police." (Carter 2004: 44)

In June 1969, plainclothes officers operating out of the Sixth Precinct called Deputy Inspector Seymour Pine and Detective Charles Smythe jointly ran a department called First Division of the Public Morals (the 'vice squad'). The pair were on a mission to close down all the mafia-run gay bars; they hated that bar owners shrugged off raids and reopened immediately. In the weeks and days before June 28, many gay bars and meeting places in the Village had been raided and ransacked, with gay men being attacked. Two gay men had been killed by an off-duty cop at the waterfront. (Carter, 2004:115)

Late on the night of Friday June 27, Pine, Smythe and their team set out on an undercover raid on the Stonewall with a search warrant so they could really ransack the place. Pine had been irritated by the owners' confident sneers on his last raid three nights ago. He planned to have the bars sawn up into chunks and confiscated along with the alcohol and jukeboxes, so that the bar would stay closed for longer. Eighteen-year-old Mark Segal, newly arrived from Philadelphia on a mission to seek out the gay 'community', was in the back room bar when, past midnight, the raid began.

'The fairies were not supposed to riot':

"The lights in the room blinked - a signal that there would be a raid – then turned all the way up. Stonewall was filled that night with the usual clientele: drag queens, hustlers, older men who liked younger guys, and stragglers like me – the boy next door who didn't know what he was searching for… That all changed when the police raided the bar. As they

[4] The legislation, and the terrifying witch-hunt that it precipitated, came to be known as the Lavender Menace.

always did, they walked in like they owned the place, cocky, assured they could do and say whatever they wanted and push people around with impunity… One of the policemen came up to me and asked for ID. I was eighteen, which was the legal drinking age in New York in those days. I rustled through my wallet, very frightened, and quickly handed him my ID… I was relieved to be to be among the first to get out of the bar." (Segal 2015:30)

Anyone with a job or family got away as fast as they could. "Those remaining were the drag queens, hustlers and runaways." (Segal, 2015: 30) Mark Segal walked out of the crowd, bumped into his new friend, activist Marty Robinson and they walked up and down the street waiting for the raid to be over.

The police had charged through the club, ordering customers into lines, telling them to get their IDs ready and stopping them from leaving. Customers identified as transvestites and assumed were prostitutes too were segregated into a separate line to be 'checked' in the club toilets, unless they voluntarily confessed to being men. New York State also had a law which permitted the arrest of anyone wearing fewer than three items of clothing 'appropriate to their gender'. (Carter 2004:15) The cops also wanted staff who had been seen selling drinks. They began ripping up benches. Police reinforcements were called and patrol cars began to gather outside. Meanwhile the gay men in the front bar were trapped. " 'Are we going to be arrested?' one shocked young man asked. Another terror-stricken man moaned, 'I'll lose my job. What will happen to me? My family! Oh no, no no!'" (Carter 2015: 138)

According to Pine, interviewed twenty years later, unusual resistance from the 'transvestites' raised the temperature that night. "'Usually they would just sit there and not say a word but now they're acting up: "get your hands off me!" "Don't touch me!" … it was a question of pushing them in, fighting them.'" (Carter 2015: 141)

A witness remembers lesbians standing their ground by the back wall, asserting their right to be there and, some police officers were "feeling some of them up inappropriately or frisking them", pushing them around and bullying them. (Carter 2015:152)

Having sealed the door, the police began letting customers go one-by-one, after having check their ID. But instead of getting out and fading into the hot night, people stayed to see what happened. Others came from around the neighbouring streets to see, and a crowd quickly gathered.

Howard Smith, a reporter for the *Village Voice* newspaper, whose offices overlooked Christopher Street, happened to look out and, picking up some notepads, ran down to ask the police what was happening. He soon ran into his colleague Lucian Truscott and the two used press passes to get behind police lines and split up to get their stories. Smith quickly found Pine and stuck closely to him. He noticed how roughly the police were hurrying people out of the bar, pushing and kicking them, and the crowd's "skittish hilarity". Several cops guarding the club door brandished revolvers and batons, pushing rioters back violently, angering those they hurt. (Carter 2004:146)

The writer Edmund White happened by and noted: "the cops, used to the cringing and disorganisation of gay crowds, snort off. But the crowd doesn't disperse… Everyone's restless, angry, high-spirited. No one has a slogan, no one even has an attitude, but something's brewing." (Carter 2015:148) White evidently didn't hear young Craig Rodwell

shout “Gay Power!” and “Get the Mafia out of the bars!” as the Stonewall staff had been loaded onto the wagons. (Carter 2004:148;149)

Then the drag queens were led out of the bar and piled into the police cars. Several jeered at the police, striking poses, throwing their arms up, bowing and kicking up their keels, playing to the crowd. One swished by the detective at the door teasing, “’Hello there fella!’”. Their friends cheered. (Carter 2004:145; Teal 1971:2).

“Suddenly the paddywagon[5] arrived and the mood of the crowd changed.” The mafia members were loaded on first, to cheers from the crowd. Three of the more blatant queens – in full drag - were loaded inside, along with the bartender and doorman, to a chorus of catcalls and boos from the crowd. A police officer violently pushed one of the transvestites, who turned around and hit him over the head with her purse. The cop then clubbed her. Anger flooded the crowd. A cry went up to push the paddywaggon over, but it drove away before anything could happen… The next person to come out was a dyke, and she put up a struggle, from car to door to car again…” This lesbian woman had been arrested inside the bar for not wearing the three articles of clothing ‘correct’ for her gender, as required by law. (Carter, 2015:15) One can only assume that all her items of clothing had been viewed by police officers. On her way out in the hallway, she had protested at being treated roughly by police, and an officer had responded by clubbing her over the head. She was pushed out, with her head down and hands cuffed, by four officers and the struggle outside to get her into a police vehicle went on for three to four minutes.

That’s when the mood snapped. Suddenly the air was flying with loose change, then bricks, cobblestones, bottles, cans. Shouts of “Pigs!” turned into chants. Someone started to sing “We Shall Overcome”, the most familiar protest song of the period. People ran to payphones, calling their friends to come down to the Stonewall. Others ran through the neighbourhood, shouting the news and calling for help. The camp drollery hardened to a cry of rage. Pine and his officers pulled back into the club; they slammed and bolted the door. Howard Smith went in too and heard what sounded like bricks being hurled at the door, yells getting louder; the cops inside the bar looked “uneasy” (Teal, 1971:2). The boarded-up windows were broken. The door was smashed open by the pounding; Pine leaned out, and grabbed someone by the hair from the seething crowd – it was heterosexual Dave Van Ronk, a peace campaigner, who’d come to see what was going on from another bar on the street. Later he said “I had been involved in anti-war demonstrations where the police descended on us like armed locusts. What I saw was yet another example of police arrogance and corruption. As far as I was concerned, anyone who’d stand again the cops was alright with me…” Inside the Stonewall, cops slapped and punched Dave until he nearly passed out, then handcuffed him. (Teal 1971:3) At this the bombardment escalated. People were throwing rubbish bins and an uprooted parking meter was used as a battering ram. Many things were happening at once, many people were being clubbed, beaten to the ground and arrested by the cops. Protestors were looking for other weapons to break into the bar. Calls went up for petrol. (Carter 2004:172)

“Some rioters began firebombing the place while others fanned out, breaking shop windows down on Christopher Street and looting the displays; somebody put a dress on the

[5] Police van

statue of General Phil Sheridan[6]. There was an odd, celebratory feel to it, the notion that we were finally fighting back and that it felt good. Bodies ricocheted off one another, but there was no fighting in the street. All the anger was directed at the policemen inside the bar. People were actually laughing and dancing out there." (Segal, 2015: 30)

With flames rising around them, the cops tried to turn a hose on the crowd from inside the bar, but it only emitted a feeble stream. They drew back and checked their revolvers. Pine later explained that he knew there was a very real chance, if the fighting escalated through fire spreading or pistol shooting, that all the police officers would be killed. (Carter 2004:172) Two officers broke a vent shaft at the back of the club to make an exit. Meanwhile the firebombing continued. From inside, Smith saw an arm at the window. "It squirts liquid into the room, and a flaring match follows… Pine aims his gun at the figures. He doesn't fire. The sound of sirens coincides with the whoosh of flames where the lighter fluid was thrown… It was that close…" (Teal 1971:3)

What followed then, as armoured riot police arrived, ready to do battle, was a *tour de force* of tactical street fighting. The crowd had overturned a car in the street and stopped the traffic so the police vans couldn't move forward. The crowd then backed slowly up Christopher Street as the riot squad inched forward in a V-wedge. It seemed that protesters were retreating. But in fact many had gone around the block and came up behind the police lines from the other way. This continued over and over again, the fighting continuing all night. (Carter 2004:175)

"Bob Kohler, the homeless kids' friend summed up the night: 'The cops were totally humiliated. This never, ever happened. They were angrier than I guess they had ever been, because everybody else had rioted. Everybody in America who had a beef had already rioted, but the fairies were not supposed to riot. And nobody else had ever won…. No other group had ever forced cops to retreat before… they wanted to kill.'" (Carter 2015)

Marty Robinson disappeared then ran back with chalk, and directed his friends to write on walls and on the ground "Meet at Stonewall tomorrow night".

"The next two nights saw thousands turn up on Christopher Street to celebrate and demonstrate the emergence of Gay Power, the new slogan on every leaflet, every piece of graffiti. Police faced them down and there were running fights in the streets all around the Stonewall. Demonstrators blocked off some of the streets and stopped all cars not driven by gays with shouts of 'Liberate Christopher Street!' On the third night, Sunday, the beat poet Allen Ginsberg came down to see. "Gay power! Isn't that great!" He said. "We're one of the largest minorities in the country – 10 per cent you know - it's about time we did something to assert ourselves." And as he walked away he commented, "You know, the guys there were so beautiful – they've lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago." (Teal 1971:7)

Conclusions: The birth of gay power

[6] General Philip Sheridan was a celebrated cavalry commander in the Civil War; his statue stands in Christopher Square, opposite the Stonewall Inn.

The seismic effect both within the US and across the world of the Stonewall Riots wasn't in suddenly overturning homophobic laws and stopping state attacks. The bans in public-sector employment and the military, rejection of LGBT+ immigrants, the city clean-ups, closures and crackdowns continued after June 28. Whilst legal lobbying was a vital component in the fight against oppression in the 1960s, just as it can be today, the story of Stonewall contains a deeper political lesson for those who continue to fight for LGBT+ liberation, wherever they may be.

The Sexual Offences Act, passed in Britain in 1967, was finally approved after ten years of committee deliberations, and it partially decriminalised sex between men, putting Britain ahead of the US on LGBT+ rights. In the parliamentary debate, the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, stated "those who suffer from this disability carry a great weight of shame all their lives". Lord Arran[7], to deflect reactionary worries that this legislation would lead to further public debate on gay civil rights, warned: "I ask those [homosexuals] to show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity… any form of ostentatious behaviour now or in the future or any form of public flaunting would be utterly distasteful… [and] make the sponsors of this bill regret that they had done what they had done." (*The Times*, July 4 1967)

In other words, homosexual and bisexual men, and by inference all LGBT+ people, were to pay for the privilege of being somewhat tolerated by the state being as invisible as possible and continue to live out a kind of apology for existing at all. In fact, in the wake of the Act, police raids on public gay meeting places were stepped up. "An estimated 15,000 – 20,000 gay and bisexual men were convicted in the decades that followed." (Tatchell, 2017)

After the Mattachine Society has ousted its original leftist leadership, "the small core of members that remained … invited psychiatrists to speak to them and sat patiently through the homophobic diatribes of these 'experts,' to prove their 'impartiality'. As Barbara Gittings [founder of lesbian sister organisation, the Daughters of Bilitis] said, "… we were so grateful just to have people – anybody - pay attention to us that we listened to everything they said, no matter how bad it was...."[8] (Roscoe; www.foundsf.org)

One of teenager Mark Segal's first priorities in arriving in New York in 1969 was to visit the MSNY offices:

"I walked out of the office about fifteen minutes later with a guy named Marty Robinson… He said, 'You don't want to be involved with these old people. They don't understand gay rights as it's happening today. Look what's happening in the black community. Look at the fight for women's rights. Look at the fight against the Vietnam War."[9] (Segal 2015)

Craig Rodwell was actually twenty-eight when he bellowed "Gay Power" at the Stonewall Riot, but he had set his sights on being a radical homosexual activist aged fourteen, after a gentle older man he'd been walking with one night on the beach at Lake Michigan was arrested by police, charged with having sex with a minor - and jailed for five years. He had worked as volunteer for MSNY but then left, frustrated with its conservatism, to set up his own radical newsletter organisation, the Homophile Youth Movement (HYMN).

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[7] UK legislature must be agreed in the two Houses of Parliament. The House of Commons is elected; the House of Lords, to date, is not. Lord Arran was one of the proposers of the bill that led to the Sexual Offences Act of 1967.

[8] Will Roscoe, *Mattachine: Radical Roots of the Gay Movement*, www.foundsf.org, date unknown

[9] Mark Segal *And Then I Danced* Akakshic Books/ Open Lens, New York, 2015 p27

A HYMN leaflet was one of the many political flyers that flooded the Village in the wake of the Stonewall Riots. The leaflet called for an end to the corrupt relationship between the Mafia and the police:

"We at HYMN believe that the only way this monopoly can be broken is through the action of Homosexual men and women themselves. We obviously cannot rely on the various agencies of government who for years have known about this situation but refused to do anything about it." (Teal 1971:9)

The power of Stonewall rebellion lay in its transformation of the collective consciousness of the oppressed. It wasn't the state that changed overnight, but the oppressed people who discovered their power to fight, hold back, outwit and defeat one of the most brutally homophobic police forces in the world.

Public meetings were held in the days and weeks following the riots, where political arguments raged. Dressed in a suit, MSNY's Dick Leitsch argued in favour of opposing police brutality and heterosexual indifference, but he insisted "the gay world must retain the favour of the Establishment". He was vehemently opposed. One young man raged in response: "We don't want acceptance goddamn it! We want respect! We through hiding in dark bars behind Mafia doormen… We're through cringing and begging like a lot of nervous old nellies!" (Teal 1971:18)

Having watched and supported other liberation movement confront the forces of the state throughout the 1960s, LGBT+ people were now able to join those uprisings on their own behalf, bringing LGBT+ rights permanently into the dimension of united resistance and bringing with them much needed questions about what was 'normal' in American society. Another leaflet advertising a meeting proclaimed: "Do you think homosexuals are revolting? You bet your sweet ass we are. We are going to make a place for ourselves in the revolutionary movement. We challenge the myths that are screwing up this society." (Teal 1971:19)

Within a week, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was born, named after the National Liberation Front which opposed the side the US state was backing in the Vietnam War. One month later the very first Pride march was held, from Christopher Street to Washington Square. A year later, Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, which was committed to fighting racism in American society on a revolutionary basis, 'by any means necessary', made a public statement in support of gay rights:

"…we must relate to the homosexual movement because it is a real thing. And I know … that homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. They might be the most oppressed people in the society. … a person should have the freedom to use his body in whatever way he wants ... maybe a homosexual could be the most revolutionary … We should be careful about using those terms that might turn our friends off. The terms "faggot" and "punk" should be deleted from our vocabulary, and especially we should not attach names normally designed for homosexuals to men who are enemies of the people, such as [Richard] Nixon or [John] Mitchell. Homosexuals are not enemies of the people."

In the wake of Stonewall, and encouraged by Newton, the drag queens, led by trans activists Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P Thompson, formed Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries.

Three years later, under pressure from gay activists, the APA voted to remove homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders.

The new movement had begun!

Postscript

Today, many suited activists are setting the LGBT+ agenda. Politicians like British Tory leaders David Cameron and Theresa May spout support for LGBT+ people while ruining lives with vicious austerity. May even forged a parliamentary coalition with the virulently homophobic Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in 2017, to prop up her own unpopular government. After the Orlando shootings in 2016, I joined thousands at a public vigil in Christopher Street, and shared the horror of many there to see the Village swarming with cops, paddywagons blocking the streets and the area around the Stonewall cordoned off. This time, police, with their horrific record on racism, Islamophobia and killings of black people, were claiming to protect the LGBT+ community.

Perhaps, like the Stonewall customers, we have had enough half-measures, hypocrisy and compromises. Of corporations and cops jumping on our movement, trying to divide us.

Perhaps it's time to unite for another rebellion.

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