

# The Stonewall Rebellion 50 Years On

Dave Stockton Tue, 02/07/2019 - 11:50

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At 1:30 in the morning, on June 28, 1969, NYPD officers, led by deputy inspector Seymour Pine burst into the Stonewall Inn on Christopher Street in Manhattan's Greenwich Village shouting "Police! We're taking the place!" Glaring white lights were turned on and the jukeboxes silenced. The cops ordered customers to form lines and submit their ID for inspection. Many were verbally abused, some roughed up and arrested. Others were dragged out of the bar and cops began bundling them into cars and a waiting patrol wagon.

The bar was a popular venue for the whole spectrum of the gay scene including men, lesbians, trans people and those who now identify as queer or non-binary. Stonewall was a place where people could dance, dress as they wished, kiss, without being mocked, harassed or denied service as would happen in 'straight' bars. However, like other gay venues, because of these unlawful activities, it was run under the control of the mafia whose members preyed on, as well as protected, the clientele. This, plus the fact that sex workers 'hustled' there, gave multiple pretexts for the police to make periodic raids but also to take their cut. The club had indeed been raided only a couple of weeks before the 28th as had several other gay bars.

As customers were assaulted and insulted a fight back started, to the astonishment of the cops who had expected tears and submissiveness not a rain of coins and bricks. The crowd that had gathered in Christopher Street began to protest loudly, to taunt and then to impede the police. The trigger by most accounts was the forceful resistance of one lesbian to being shoved into a police vehicle. She escaped twice and when the police caught her they beat her with their clubs. Then the explosion came.

Soon missiles were flying and 'New York's Finest' found themselves driven back and besieged inside the Stonewall Inn, with a crowd running to hundreds 'rioting' outside. Disturbances continued for three successive nights, some say longer.

Not just gay men but lesbians, transgender women and cross-dressers, along with homeless young people living in Christopher Park, joined in, indeed they were in the forefront of the riots. In 1970, two transgender activists who were involved, Sylvia Rivera, who was Latina, and Marsha P. Johnson, who was black, co-founded an organisation called STAR, standing for Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries, the term 'transgender' was not common then.

## The impact of Stonewall

Stonewall 50 years on remains iconic for all those fighting oppression on account of their sexuality and gender presentations that do not conform to the patriarchal binary. Like International Women's Day (March 8) and the May 1st workers' celebrations before it, June 28 has become a day of struggle in many countries and at many times, despite attempts to incorporate it by the state and even by the police.

Its predecessors in this have also been commercialised, tamed, made respectable, yet they always remain a focus for resistance. And in many cities of the world, like Istanbul to this day, people who try to organise

Pride events face savage, sometimes murderous, repression. This is one good reason why, in countries with democratic rights, June 28 should not be handed over to the corporations or the liberals, let alone the police, just to show "how far we have come?". We owe it to those facing beatings and murders to make it a militant demonstration of solidarity with them.

The 50th anniversary in the USA has seen more attempts at incorporation and taming, with Democratic presidential hopeful Joe Biden visiting the Stonewall and New York Police Commissioner James O'Neill stating; "While I'm certainly not going to stand up here and pretend to be an expert on what happened at Stonewall, I do know what happened should not have happened?".

In both Britain and the USA, cops have joined, or plan to join, Pride marches. All this is little more than a cynical attempt to wrap the homophobic, misogynist and transphobic state in the rainbow banner. So it is a good time to remind ourselves of how the "gay movement" inspired by the Stonewall rebellion, went way beyond the respectable lobbying and "homosexual law reform" campaigns of preceding decades.

### Sodomy in the USA

The 1950s were an especially hard time for all LGBT people. The red-baiting of McCarthyism had as part of it a witch hunt known as the Lavender Scare, when George Gabrielson, Republican National Chairman, denounced "sexual perverts who have infiltrated our Government in recent years" and were "perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists".

This meant that people could be fired from their jobs if their sexuality, or non-binary conforming gender roles, were discovered by their employers. In the schools, in the armed services, in churches, in public and political life, not to speak of the family, exposure was usually devastating. And for everyone exposed, many more were forced into "the closet", wracked with anxiety and mental distress

Various state laws banned dancing in public with same-sex partners and enforced the wearing of a minimum of three pieces of "gender-appropriate" clothing. Police used these laws to harass and intimidate those who transgressed them, regularly raiding clubs which gays, lesbians and transgender people, or cross-dressers frequented. In consequence it was a golden age for blackmailers.

Homosexuality was still defined by the American Psychiatric Association as a psychiatric disorder until 1973. Psychiatrists saw their task as to "cure" gay people, often with the horrible aversion therapy. The churches, and the USA was and remains a land where the churches wield enormous influence, despite the constitutional separation from the state, likewise denounced sodomy as one of the most heinous of sins.

Thus, huge numbers of LGBT+ people themselves thought how they felt was indeed a shameful perversion and/or a mortal sin, and many young people were disowned by their families, or left home for a life on the streets. Many committed suicide. Brutal beatings, "queer bashing", and murders were not only frequent but not treated seriously by the police (similarly to domestic violence).

Prior to 1962, sodomy was a felony in every state, punished by a lengthy term of imprisonment and/or hard labour. Illinois was the first state to repeal its law and a number of others followed suit but the Supreme Court still upheld the constitutionality of Georgia's laws criminalising oral and anal sex in private between consenting adults, in the 1986 case, *Bowers v. Hardwick*.

The first Gay Pride marches were held in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago, as well as in New York, on June 28, 1970. One year after that, in 1971, Berlin, London and Paris saw their first Prides and, since then, "Pride" has developed as a truly global event.

## Coming Out

Stonewall inspired a series of public actions across the USA and its story spread across the Atlantic and even further afield. It fell on fertile ground because of the mass student antiwar movement, the black power and antiracist movements and the sit-ins and teach-ins that had been held in colleges over the previous years. In these, sexual liberation for the young was a major theme. Though much of it was, as feminists pointed out, sexist and heterosexist, it opened the way for the more radical ideas of the 1970s. In the USA, Stonewall led to the foundation of the Gay Liberation Front a month or two later and the appearance of its paper *Come Out*.

In the USA, the GLF rapidly adopted radical positions expressing solidarity with the Black Panther Party and struggles against the Vietnam War, and the Panthers, then facing murderous repression from the US state, responded. Huey P. Newton wrote 'A letter to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation' in which he recognised these movements as comrades in arms.

Gay liberation necessarily meant liberation from self-oppression, from life in the closet. The GLF's proposed means was for more and more gays to 'come out' so that homophobia would be challenged and overcome. This strategy relied on the courage of the individual, of course helped by local groups.

Carl Wittman's *A Gay Manifesto*, written just before Stonewall but published in January, 1970, denounced male chauvinism and the nuclear family as creating oppression both for women and for gay males. Though he admitted it was written from a male gay perspective, the manifesto declared women fighting for their liberation 'are our closest ally', and suggested the need for a lesbian caucus. On the movement's relationship to the working class it was more cautious but not hostile.

'We're not, as a group, Marxist or communist. We haven't figured out what kind of political/economic system is good for us as gays. Neither capitalist nor socialist countries have treated us as anything other than non grata so far. But we know we are radical, in that we know the system that we're under now is a direct source of oppression, and it's not a question of getting our share of the pie. The pie is rotten.'

In fact, Wittman had been on the left but his caution must be understood in the context of an extended period where working class parties had taken reactionary positions on homosexuality and non-conforming gender roles.

Though the Bolsheviks repealed the anti-sodomy laws of Tsars in 1917, and the 1920s USSR constitution did likewise, in 1933, Joseph Stalin introduced Article 121 of the criminal code of the Soviet Union, which made male homosexuality a crime punishable by up to five years in prison with hard labour.

Even amongst Trotskyists the view could be heard that homosexuality was a psychological disorder or even a vice of the upper class, practiced in private schools. Though the Trotskyists, unlike the Stalinists for a long period, supported homosexual rights and condemned legal restriction, it took years of arguments by lesbian and gay activists to win them to full support.

## Buggery In Britain

Several statutes of the much admired Tudor monarchs, made anal intercourse between men (and animals) punishable by death; starting with Henry VIII's Buggery Act of 1533. Of course, various famous literary expressions of homoerotic love were created in this period by, for example, Marlowe, Shakespeare and Rochester, and, if you were a royal homosexual, as was James I of England and VI of Scotland, things were very different. However, for the lower classes the death penalty was still occasionally being inflicted up to the 1830s.

The Tudor death penalty was still being supported in Blackstone's Commentaries on the Laws of England (1759), a foundation stone of American as well as British law. It quoted the dictum, drawn from the laws of the Late Roman Emperors that defined male homosexuality as "that horrible crime, not to be named amongst Christians".

The updating Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, with the Labouchere Amendment, defined oral and anal sex in private between consenting adults as "gross indecency" subjecting it to the punishment of imprisonment at hard labour. This then spread to all the British colonies and is in full force today in many of the independent successor states. Contrast this with the Code Napoléon that did not punish homosexual acts and as a consequence francophone ex-colonies and their successor states do not either. This disgusting "British heritage" is rarely mentioned.

The 1885 CLA Act was responsible for the conviction and imprisonment at hard labour of the Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde and later, in the 1950s, the brilliant mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing. Wilde's imprisonment and "disgrace" and Turing's chemical castration contributed to the former's early death and the latter's suicide. The 1950s saw an increasing debate and unease as police ran a campaign of entrapment, and the Wolfson Committee recommended liberal reform, which the Tories refused to implement.

A breakthrough came during the 1964-70 Wilson government. A private member's bill relating to homosexual acts was introduced by the Labour MP, Leo Abse. It amended the Sexual Offences Act (1967 c. 60) that finally decriminalised homosexual acts in private between two men, over the age of 21. It took till 1994 before it was lowered to 18, and then to 16, in 2001. Peter Tatchell has correctly warned against the complacent self-congratulation about the 1967 Act. He says that he has calculated that:

"15,000-plus gay men were convicted in the decades that followed the 1967 liberalisation. Not only was homosexuality only partly decriminalised by the 1967 act, but the remaining anti-gay laws were policed more aggressively than before by a state that opposed gay acceptance and equality. In total, from 1885 to 2013, nearly 100,000 men were arrested for same-sex acts."

Young gay adults continued to be hounded by police and school authorities for expressing their love physically. Moreover, the new law applied only to England and Wales, not to Scotland and Northern Ireland. Scotland did not legalise it until 1980 and Northern Ireland not till 1982.

In Britain, a radical Gay movement was also a response to Stonewall and, like the women's liberation movement, was inspired by events in the USA. The UK's Gay Liberation Front first met in the London School of Economics on October 13, 1970 and, Tatchell records, it was a collective working group that drew up a manifesto. It was very radical in its analysis:

"The oppression of gay people starts in the most basic unit of society, the family, consisting of the man in charge, a slave as his wife, and their children on whom they force themselves as the ideal models. The very form of the family works against homosexuality."

It stated:

"The starting point of our liberation must be to rid ourselves of the oppression which lies in the head of every one of us - we must root out the idea that homosexuality is bad, sick or immoral, and develop a gay pride."

And concluded:

?As we cannot carry out this revolutionary change alone, and as the abolition of gender roles is also a necessary condition of women's liberation, we will work to form a strategic alliance with the women's liberation movement, aiming to develop our ideas and our practice in close inter-relation. In order to build this alliance, the brothers in gay liberation will have to be prepared to sacrifice that degree of male chauvinism and male privilege that they still all possess.?

It had as its immediate demands:

? That all discrimination against gay people, male and female, by the law, by employers, and by society at large should end.

? That all people who feel attracted to a member of their own sex be taught that such feelings are perfectly valid.

? That sex education in schools stop being exclusively heterosexual.

? That psychiatrists stop treating homosexuality as though it were a problem or sickness, thereby giving gay people senseless guilt complexes.

? That gay people be legally free to contact other gay people through newspaper ads, on the streets, and by any other means they may want, as are heterosexuals, and that police harassment should cease right now.

? That employers should no longer be allowed to discriminate against anyone on account of their sexual preferences.

? That the age of consent for gay males be reduced to the same as for straights.(i.e. from 21 to 16 ?ed.)

? That gay people be free to hold hands and kiss in public, as are heterosexuals.

In conclusion

The new militant movements expanded to many countries and helped win the repeal of a series of brutally repressive and discriminatory laws and the enactment of positive rights. They were radical in linking the critique of the bourgeois family to the gender norms of masculinity and femininity and consciously seeking to integrate or ally themselves with the second wave of feminism, black liberation and the anti-imperialist opposition to imperialist wars.

Today, the fact that 69 percent of Americans, including majorities in all 50 states, support laws protecting LGBT people from discrimination in jobs, public accommodation, and housing, does indeed indicate the ground the movement has gained in public consciousness. But some of the veterans of the movement have taken the opportunity of the 50th anniversary to draw attention to some of the downsides.

One of its veteran activists and historians, Martin Duberman (author of Stonewall:The Definitive Story ,1993/2019, published another book, Has the Gay Movement Failed? in 2018.

He criticises ?the movement's recent assimilationist agenda, marriage rights and permission to serve openly in the Armed Forces? contrasting it with ?the far broader agenda that had characterized the gay liberation front (GLF) at its inception in the period immediately following the Stonewall riots in the aftermath of these riots. GLF had called for a fierce full-scale assault on sexual and gender norms, on imperialistic wars and capitalist greed and on the shameful mistreatment of racial and ethnic minorities.? The GLF was, he says, ?overtly anti-religious, anti-nuclear family, anti-capitalist, and antiwar?.

In Britain, a similar point was made on Stonewall?s 40th anniversary by Peter Tatchell in Our Lost Gay Radicalism, Guardian 26 June 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/26/gay-lgbt-victimhoo...> [1]. He says;

??since Stonewall and GLF, there has been a massive retreat from that radical vision. Most LGBT people no longer question the values, laws and institutions of society. They are content to settle for equal rights

within the status quo.?

And it has meant that the grand, indeed utopian, perspectives of the GLF of 1970-73 have been abandoned for reformist and liberal objectives which centre on the demand for integration into society and its institutions, that were once denounced.

The same could of course be said of many of the radical movement of the 1960s and 1970s, black power, student power, anti-war and imperialism, feminism etc. An initial revolutionary and utopian phase eventually gave way to a process of sub-division and fragmentation ending in very reformist and bourgeois liberal goals.

Like second wave feminism, gay liberation concentrated heavily on fighting the effects of oppression for individuals, 'consciousness raising?', 'coming out'. Creating sub-cultures and communal ways of living, though necessary and justified, became counterposed to the broad social and class struggles of the period. In Britain, this was temporarily and inspiringly overcome with the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners movement of 1984-5. This achieved a real breakthrough as far as British unions and their members, as well as in the Labour Party, were concerned.

Marxists should look positively, as well as critically, to this early period of the gay and women's liberations movement of the early 70's. There was much for genuine revolutionary Marxists to agree with in its location of sex and gender oppression in the bourgeois family, even if many of the revolutionary groups and parties of that era failed to recognise this in time. Indeed, it was these movements that helped Marxists to rediscover their own socially radical past.

What they should have realised was that, in the period from the early 1900s up to the late 1920s, Marxists recognised that all forms of gender and sexuality based oppression rested on a patriarchal family that heavily restricts women to childrearing and domestic labour. It is capitalism's defence of this division of labour, which was essential to previous forms of class society as well, that requires the ideological and quite literal policing of binary gender roles and the persecution of those who transgress them.

To uproot this system requires the uprooting of capitalist exploitation and then the transcendence of the private family unit and household. The fundamental agent necessary for such a transformation is the working class, male and female, gay and 'straight?', plus people of all gender "identities". Of course, those who bear the burden of oppression have a central role in fighting it, but they cannot do this alone or in isolation. They need the social force of the working class, the majority. But, in turn, the working class can only fit itself for this task if it comes forward as the champion of all who suffer these oppressions. The revolutionary vanguard forces of the working class today can learn much from the radical progressive goals and demands which first arose from the Stonewall rebellion.

Further reading

The fullest historical account remains David Carter's (2004) *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution*. St Martin's Press N.Y., chapters 7-11. Also invaluable is Martin Duberman's *Stonewall*, first published by Penguin Books in 1993 with a second edition in 2019, which concentrates on the experiences and lives of a number of the participants and activists in the gay liberation movement.

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[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jun/26/gay-lgbt-victimhood-stonewall>