

The Stonewall Inn

a gay identity in flux

A local Greenwich Village newspaper, The Village Voice, was one of the papers writing about the Stonewall Inn Riots at the time they happened in June 1969.

The forces of faggotry, spurred by a Friday night raid on one of the city's largest, most popular, and longest lived gay bars, the Stonewall Inn, rallied Saturday night in an unprecedented protest against the raid and continued Sunday night to assert presence, possibility, and pride until the early hours of Monday morning. "I'm a faggot, and I'm proud of it!" "Gay Power!" "I like boys!" — these and many other slogans were heard all three nights as the show of force by the city's finery met the force of the city's finest. The result was a kind of liberation, as the gay brigade emerged from the bars, back rooms, and bedrooms of the Village and became street people.

Truscott IV, Lucian K. "Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square." Village Voice, 3.7.1969, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/06/21/gay-power-comes-to-sheridan-square/>

What had been typical police harassment of the queer community, had now mobilized a response that refused to go down quietly. The events marked a point in LGBTQ-history where gay activism began to demand visibility and action instead of strategies of fitting-in. Previously existing activist groups, such as the Mattachine Society, were named to disguise the nature of the association where as the newly formed organizations, e.g. Gay Activist Alliance, Gay Liberation Front and the Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (STAR), made their intentions clear from the start. That is to say the Stonewall Inn Riots can be seen as a typical development of a non-straight identity for the gay liberation movement, the point of publicly coming out of the closet.

Visibility and pride are messages for the people around you that they too can decide not to follow the straight expectations. Our differences make space for everyone to be themselves, to be different. At the same time passing in the crowd is necessary at times for safety and needed for reasons of comfort. In an article in The Village Voice two years after the Riots this situation is described by Arthur Bell as they discuss the various activist groups post-Stonewall:

The feeling of pride, the methods and means of achieving it, the development of a gay identity, varies from group to group, from individual to individual. Many of the older professionals who regularly attend the West Side Discussion Group's Wednesday meetings feel a camaraderie exchanging pleasantries at the social hour that follows the discussion. There's an x-ray ambience over coffee and fig newtons generally missing at the "sex object" haunts, the bars, the baths, the dark corners. The coffee klatsch exchanges about "taste" during the gay pride march and poor Lawrence of Arabia would send a gay activist screaming to his nearest firehouse. But to the doctor and lawyer who are not yet ready to risk a TV close-up with a picket sign, West Side is a push out of the closet, a step from consciousness zero to consciousness one.

Bell, Arthur. "The Year 2: Toward a Gay Community." Village Voice, 1.7.1971, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2020/06/25/the-year-2-toward-a-gay-community/>

Simultaneously, passing is not an option for everyone. The Stonewall Inn Riots were largely headed by drag queens and transgender people. Notably Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, the co-founders of STAR, were active in the beginning of the gay liberation movement.

Quickly the movement was taken over by gay men. The gender minorities were left with less liberation and acceptance and the variations of the sexual spectrum were simplified as 'gay'. This is apparent for example in the way popular culture became to represent inclusion by having a gay cis-man character in prime-time TV-shows in the early 2000's.

Max Scherr comments on the situation in 1972 on Berkeley Barb, an underground newspaper from California:

Theoretically, the parades are all-inclusive, and open to any and everyone—all types of gays. In the earlier parades, both in New York and in LA, many gays demanded that transvestites and transsexuals not be permitted to participate, and led to the formation of transvestite and transsexual militant groups. In New York, although TVs/TSs were NOT permitted to march by parade organizers, Lee Brewster's Queens Liberation Front marched anyway. Ironically, the Stonewall riots were fought mostly by transvestites and transsexuals—the "effeminate" types. At one point, queens wrote "butches, where are you now that we need you?" on the sidewalks during the riots. (They come out once a year on June 25...)

Scherr, Max. "Freedom Parade Looks Good." Berkeley Barb, Volume 14, 23.6.1972. Digital Transgender Archive, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/6m311p73q>

The fact that gay cis-men have benefited the most from the liberation movement is hardly surprising in a patriarchal society but what other factors have contributed to the fractioned representation of the LGBTQ-community in the society at large?

The variations of human sexuality began to be classified in the end of the 19th century with Karl Maria Kertbeny coining the terms heterosexuality and homosexuality in 1868. In 1886 Richard von Krafft-Ebing published the book *Psychopathia Sexualis* listing different forms of human sexuality in a similar way to Carl von Linné's classification of plants in *Systema Naturae*. For example sadism and masochism were named and classified by Krafft-Ebing.

By naming sexual desires this scientific foray gave birth to homosexual and heterosexual identities. It became possible to discuss sexuality in a more nuanced way and identify yourself and others around you based on sexuality. At the same time this categorization created fixed boxes which became rigid in their specificity of "scientific" accuracy, a tool to create difference - and *others* - which in itself constitutes power to the dominant groups of society.

Monique Wittig is interested in the strategic importance of language while calling to replace the straight society with lesbianism:

We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic for us. For there is another order of materiality, that of language, and language is worked upon from within by these strategic concepts. It is at the same time tightly connected to the political field where everything that concerns language, science and thought refers to the person as subjectivity and to her/ his relationship to society. And we cannot leave this within the power of the straight mind or the thought of domination.

Wittig, Monique. "The Straight Mind." *Feminist Issues*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1980, pp. 103–111.

Should we then start naming ourselves instead or could the un-named become a source of empowerment and a path to transcending the heterosexual world? What the rigidity of categories creates is an atmosphere where in order to fit-in, you need to find your box, your own identity-family, to feel the acceptance you might have missed when departing from the straight-world. This experience is described by Perry Brass, one of the activists of the Gay Liberation Front in the 1970's:

GLF (Gay Liberation Front) was organized around cells and each cell was like an autonomous group within GLF. Each cell could dictate its own terms and what it did as a part of a larger group.

What really kind of nourished me through GLF was that we also had families. These were kind of affinity groups of our cliques within the organization and I quickly came to belong to one. My group had about six guys in it and they were just wonderful. I mean they gave me this sense of belonging and emotional nourishment that I needed.

GLF was a radical political organization and when you had this kind of radical politics you always have the “more radical than thou” and “more virtuous than thou” - crap.

Brass, Perry and Palmer, Steven. “Perry Brass | The Stonewall Oral History Project.” YouTube, LGBTQCenterNYC, 7.11.2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzIrsF0R1ns>

They continue to describe the conflict Perry experienced with for example STAR and the Third World Gay Revolution -groups which were also part of the GLF. What this conflict within a shared movement depicts is a huge variety of human experience which defies categorization. While a strong sense of identity is crucial for a political movement to hold a common sense of meaning and a driving force to impact change, it simultaneously creates fragmentation, competition and uneven distribution of power, enabling the already empowered to take charge of the change.

Gay people aren't fighting anymore, they don't care as long as they have a bar to go to. You know that, darling. But when I came down here 10 years ago, I caught the drift the minute I walked into Sheridan Square. I said, 'It's about time, honey.'

Johnson, Marsha P. and Watson, Steve. “Stonewall 1979: The Drag of Politics.” Village Voice, 15.6.1979, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/06/04/stonewall-1979-the-drag-of-politics/>