History.2: Gay American History | The 2025 Ralph Janis Seminar in History
Faculty: Dr. Sara Warner, Director of LGBT Studies and Associate Professor of Performing & Media Arts
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Cycles of Change, Questions of Strategy: The Gay and Lesbian Movement After Fifty Years

Fifty years have elapsed since Harry Hay, an American Communist living in southern California, entertained the guests at a gay party by spinning out a plan for an imaginary political organization of homosexuals. In the intervening half century, gay men and lesbians have taken Hay's idea and run with it. They have built thousands of organizations—local, statewide, and national—dedicated to the proposition that they deserve the same rights and ought to be treated with the same respect as other Americans.

Many of these organizations have been explicitly political. They work to influence the outcome of elections, affect the content of party platforms, lobby for or against the passage of new laws and the repeal of existing ones, reshape the interpretation of the law through litigation, negotiate with bureaucrats to change the policies of government agencies, and pressure public officials through noisy demonstrations. Many more of these organizations are not directly involved in the political process. Lesbians and gay men have created community centers, social service organizations, institutions

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for religious worship, sports leagues, health clinics, newspapers, magazines, bookstores, and publishing companies. More social and cultural than political in their expressed missions, these organizations nonetheless feed into the stream of overt political activity. By fostering stronger community ties and a collective awareness of belonging to a minority group, these organizations constitute a foundation on which to build sustained political engagement. In other words, the relationship of the gay *movement* and the gay *community* is close and interdependent.

Over the course of five decades, the work of all of these organizations, along with the actions of individuals and the support of mainstream groups and institutions, has dramatically changed the place of gay men and lesbians in American politics, law, society, and culture. Enough has happened over a long enough time to make it possible to do more than simply describe change. Half a century of public engagement over the status of gays and lesbians offers the opportunity to observe cycles of activity, suggest patterns of change, and draw conclusions that go beyond single campaigns, particular issues, and discrete local studies.

In this chapter I do three things. First, I offer a brief overview of the history of the gay and lesbian movement in the United States, sketching with broad brush strokes the main contours of political activity and change. Second, I address the issue of the velocity and intensity of change by teasing out from the historical record some sense of cyclical patterns. Third, I turn to questions of strategy, not in relation to individual goals or issues but more broadly—to the underlying strategic assumptions that have guided much of the movement's work in different eras. I end by pointing to some of the implications this analysis may have for contemporary choices facing political activists.

A Historical Overview

POST–WORLD WAR II ORIGINS[1]

The gay movement was born from the tension created by a brief interlude of freedom quickly followed by intense repression. By disrupting typical patterns of heterosexual sociability, World War II dramatically accelerated the development of a shared group identity among lesbians and gay men. The increased sex segregation, the geographic mobility, and the temporary freedom from the constraints of family allowed large numbers of young men and

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women, in a concentrated period of time, to explore their sexual desires and discover communities of men and women like themselves. The effects can be seen in the immediate postwar years: a growth in the number of gay and lesbian bars; the appearance of a spate of novels with gay and lesbian themes; the release of the Kinsey study of male sexual behavior in 1948 and the attention its findings on homosexuality received; the courageous efforts of some veterans to challenge the discharges they received for homosexual conduct; and the publication in 1951 of *The Homosexual in America,* a plea for understanding and tolerance of an unrecognized minority group in America.[2]

But the postwar years also brought an intensely conservative reaction. Most often thought of as a political era of virulent anti-Communism at home, the broad phenomenon known as McCarthyism witnessed as well an attack on homosexuals at every level of government and in a wide array of institutions. The Senate investigated the employment of "sex perverts" by the government; the military conducted witch-hunts against gays and lesbians; the FBI began surveillance of the gay community; postal authorities opened the mail of suspected homosexuals. In cities around the country, police harassed and arrested lesbians and gay men, while the press reported the names of these targets of zealous law enforcement officials. Throughout the 1950s, hundreds of gays and lesbians daily experienced trouble with the police, other government agencies, or their employers.[3]

In this setting, Harry Hay and a few other leftist gay men formed a secret organization, the Mattachine Society, in Los Angeles in 1951, dedicated to "liberating one of our largest minorities from . . . persecution."[4] Although they envisioned a radical organization that would mobilize masses of homosexuals to make change, the conservative temper of the 1950s led the organization, and the inchoate movement it was launching, in a more moderate direction. The Mattachine Society, along with the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), a lesbian organization formed in San Francisco in 1955, spoke in softer, gentler tones. Making a plea for tolerance, they focused on education and information. Each organization published a magazine, established chapters in several cities, held public forums, and made contact with sympathetic professionals in law, medicine, and religion. As a counterpoint, a small group of more defiant gays published a magazine, *ONE,* that offered a sassier, bolder and brasher voice—so much so that after the postal authorities confiscated copies of it as obscene, the editors of *ONE* challenged the

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action and won a Supreme Court ruling that protected their right to publish material about homosexuality. It was the only significant legal victory of the 1950s.

The accommodationist stance of the Mattachine and DOB was very much suited to the times. It allowed the groups to take root, thus beginning a tradition of formal lesbian and gay organization that remains continuous to the present day. But the approach of these first activists also did not promise much in the way of change.

Provoked by the heroism of the southern civil rights movement and the idealistic rhetoric of the Kennedy presidency, the temper of the country began to shift in the early 1960s. The changed mood affected the outlook of the gay movement. In the northeast, a group of newer recruits began to speak with greater self-assurance. For instance, activists such as Frank Kameny, Barbara Gittings, and Jack Nichols boldly rejected the dominant medical view of homosexuality as an illness and confidently asserted the inherent health and goodness of their sexual orientation. Through letter writing, meetings, public picketing, and court cases, they also directly challenged the discriminatory practices of the federal government, which banned the employment of lesbians and gay men in all federal jobs and denied them security clearances in the private sector. By the late sixties, they had won two key cases in federal court, which began the process of overturning the ban.

In San Francisco, meanwhile, a combination of police repression and political scandals was provoking greater militancy among activists there. In 1961, Jose Sarria, a drag performer in one of the city's gay bars, ran for the Board of Supervisors in response to the police attacks on the gay subculture. His campaign led to the birth of San Francisco's first gay community newspaper as well as the formation of a trade association among gay bar owners. Before long, activists were in dialogue with some of the city's liberal Protestant ministers, were meeting regularly with public officials, and were holding candidate nights during fall electoral campaigns.

By the late 1960s, gay and lesbian activists across the country were creating tighter networks among themselves. There were fledgling groups in as many as two dozen cities. Basic goals of sodomy law repeal and fair employment practices had won the endorsement of mainstream organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, which, increasingly, was advocating for this still-small social movement. Court cases in a number of states had provided gay bars with some protection against harassment, while the Supreme

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Court had further narrowed the applicability of obscenity statutes to homosexual material. Prodded by activists, dissenting voices within the medical profession were beginning to challenge the reigning orthodoxy that viewed homosexuality as disease.

FROM STONEWALL TO AIDS[5]

Even as these developments reoriented the focus of the gay movement away from the cautious educational efforts of the 1950s toward a more active engagement with law, politics, and public policy, the leading edge of social protest in the United States had moved far beyond the liberal, though militant, reform efforts of most gay activists. Black Power, the New Left, the antiwar movement, an emerging women's liberation movement, the youth counterculture: together these were creating a profound generational divide in which many adolescents and young adults broke sharply with mainstream values. Espousing a rhetoric of revolution, radicals in a variety of movements set themselves against not only the American government, but most forms of institutional authority.

The Stonewall Riots of June 1969—when the drag queens and other patrons of the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village fought the police who were raiding the bar—became the catalytic event that allowed young gay men and lesbians to draw the connection between their own status as homosexuals and the larger political critique that the movements of the 1960s were making about American society. Taking advantage of the extensive networks of communication that radicals of the 1960s had built, they created a new kind of gay and lesbian movement. Adopting organizational names such as the Gay Liberation Front, Radicalesbians, and Third World Gay Revolution, these activists brought anger, militancy, and an anarchic kind of daring to the goal of gay and lesbian freedom. They conducted sit-ins in the offices of newspapers and magazines that purveyed demeaning images of homosexuals; they marched in the street to protest police harassment; they disrupted the conventions of psychiatrists who proclaimed them to be sick; they occupied campus buildings to win concessions from university administrators. Proclaiming the necessity of "coming out of the closet" as the first essential step toward freedom, they acted on their beliefs by being as visible as they could in every sphere of life. And, they produced a new kind of writing about homosexuality, one that used the language of oppression, that analyzed

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sexuality and gender roles as mechanisms of inequality, and that argued for the relationship between gay oppression and other forms of social injustice.

The message of gay liberation and lesbian feminism proved infectious, and it spread very quickly. On the eve of Stonewall, almost twenty years after the founding of the Mattachine Society, there were perhaps fifty gay and lesbian social change organizations in the United States. By 1973, four years after Stonewall, there were more than 800. The impulse to work in an organized way for change spread quickly from large cities like New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, from liberal university communities like Berkeley, Madison, Ann Arbor, and Cambridge, to cities and towns in every region of the country.

The gay men and lesbians motivated by Stonewall and the protest movements of the 1960s left an important legacy, one in which the notions of coming out as the key to change and pride as a stance toward one's sexual identity were central. These characteristics were adopted by virtually all the individuals and groups comprising the post-Stonewall movement. But the radical sea that spawned gay liberation was already drying up by the early 1970s. As the decade wore on, most of the organizations campaigning for gay freedom eschewed revolutionary rhetoric and instead tended to adopt one of two approaches to social change: (1) the reform of laws, public policies, and institutional practices so that lesbians and gay men enjoyd fair and equal treatment; and (2) the building of institutions designed to create a strong, cohesive, and visible community. The two purposes, of course, were intimately related since a well-organized, articulate, and mobilized community has a greater ability to change laws and public policies. And, to describe many of these organizations as "reform-oriented" says little about the tactics they wielded, which ranged from drafting legislation, lobbying elected officials, and registering voters to picketing, marching, and civil disobedience.

For instance, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, an "ACLU" for gays and lesbians, was founded in 1973 with the purpose of using litigation to make change. The National Gay Task Force, also founded in 1973, worked with federal bureaucrats to change policies in areas such as immigration and the issuance of security clearances, and also sought to mobilize gays and lesbians to run as delegates to the national conventions of the major political parties. Locally, an organization like the Gay Activist Alliance of

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Washington, D.C., worked to change police practices and campaigned for gay-friendly candidates for office. Around the country, gays and lesbians created community centers; they published newspapers and opened bookstores; they formed bowling and softball leagues and attended services at gay churches and synagogues; they staffed their own health clinics. And they also began to form caucuses and mobilize within institutions such as religious denominations, colleges and universities, professional associations of various kinds, and labor unions.

Not surprisingly, the higher visibility, the more extensive level of organization, and the new language of pride and respect sparked a significant degree of change in the decade after Stonewall. By the early 1980s, roughly half the states had repealed their sodomy statutes; more than three dozen municipalities, including some of the nation's larger cities, had prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual preference or orientation; and some political figures of national stature spoke out in favor of gay rights. Building on work that had started before Stonewall, activists succeeded in persuading the American Psychiatric Association in 1973 to eliminate homosexuality from its list of mental disorders; two years later, the federal Civil Service Commission dropped its blanket ban on the employment of lesbians and gay men. During the Carter presidency, a delegation of gay and lesbian leaders were invited to the White House to discuss their goals, and in 1980 the Democratic Party included a gay rights plank in its national platform. And, numbers of court cases had been won, which seemed definitively to establish that gay and lesbian organizations enjoyed the constitutional protections of the First Amendment.

Even as the gay and lesbian community grew more visible and became more densely organized, the almost utopian sense of optimism that followed in the wake of Stonewall was fading. By the early 1980s, the nation's politics and social climate were growing more conservative, as witnessed by the election of Ronald Reagan to the White House in 1980 and the Republican majority in the Senate. The further repeal of sodomy statutes virtually stopped in the 1980s, and the passage of civil rights protections for homosexuals slowed as well. At the same time that legislative advances became less common, a more aggressive opposition to the gay movement coalesced. First coming to national attention in 1977, through the campaign led by Anita Bryant to repeal gay rights legislation in Dade County, Florida, an antigay Christian conservatism mounted similar successful campaigns in a number of locali-

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ties. In Congress, conservative Republicans proposed a Family Protection Act designed in part to fortify the legislative barriers against gay equality.

Coincident with the rise of these outside threats were the internal divisions that compromised the ability of activists to mobilize their constituents and have the movement speak with a unified voice. Since the early 1970s, male sexism had led many lesbians to organize separate groups for women; by the end of the 1970s, a similar process was underway among gay people of color antagonized by the persistence of white racism in the institutions of the gay community. Differences also regularly emerged between those who pursued mainstream methods of lobbying, education, and negotiation and those who urged more militant, confrontational tactics; between those whose work gave priority to opening up mainstream institutions to gays and lesbians and those who valued the building of almost "nationalist" communities; and between those who saw homophobia and gay oppression as self-contained issues needing political attention and those who saw gay freedom coming only through a broader multi-issue struggle for social justice.

In the short run, these conflicts variously bred anger, frustration, and the fracturing of a movement still too weak to achieve its full range of goals. In the longer run, the efforts to respond to them promised a more densely organized community, with the experience of employing a fuller range of tactics to make change, involving participants who reflected the broad demographics of American society. For beneath all the particular campaigns and conflicts there remained one overriding fact in the early 1980s: the vast majority of lesbians and gay men, more than a decade after Stonewall and a generation after the founding of the Mattachine Society, remained "in the closet." Many who were willing to socialize within gay and lesbian worlds nonetheless kept their identity a secret from outsiders. Many others even maintained a distance from the social institutions of the gay community.

AIDS AND ITS IMPACT[6]

The biggest challenge, perhaps because completely unexpected, soon became the source of renewed political momentum for the gay and lesbian movement. In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control first reported the mysterious outbreak of fatal illnesses among clusters of gay men in a few major urban areas. Soon labeled acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, it spread during the 1980s with alarming rapidity among gay and bisexual men. In contrast to some other recently identified medical conditions—Legion-

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naire's disease and toxic shock syndrome—the media gave AIDS little attention, and government, especially in Washington, was loathe to devote resources to combatting the epidemic. When combined with the antigay rhetoric that the epidemic spawned, AIDS initially highlighted the vulnerability and relative political weakness of the gay and lesbian community.

But AIDS also unleashed vitally new constructive energy. Within a few years, gays and lesbians had built a nationwide infrastructure of organizations that provided health care and social services, assisted in scientific research, spearheaded prevention campaigns, and engaged in spirited public advocacy to combat the epidemic and the discrimination entwined with it. The fight against AIDS had startling effects. It brought many more gays and lesbians out of the closet, as the life-and-death nature of the epidemic overcame the fear of coming out. It led to renewed cooperation among lesbians and gay men. It provided a more visible platform for lesbians and gays of color and resources for them to build organizations of their own to fight AIDS. Eventually, policymakers at every level of government and in a host of other mainstream institutions opened their doors to gay men and lesbians wearing the hat of AIDS activist. And, once opened, it became easier for activists to use this new access to address issues of homophobia and gay oppression.

The effects can be seen most clearly through two events in 1987: the national March on Washington to fight AIDS and promote equality for gays and lesbians and the birth of ACT UP. In 1979, activists had organized a first national march; the most generous estimates put the crowd at 100,000. Now, eight years and many deaths from AIDS later, well over half a million men and women assembled from around the country. The experience was so powerful for many that they returned home with a determination not only to halt the spread of AIDS but to live openly as gay or lesbian. For instance, in North Carolina, where I was living at the time, the year or so after the March on Washington witnessed the formation of activist organizations in several cities and legislative hearings in a number of locales. Meanwhile, a new militancy was spreading among AIDS activists, which found expression in the direct action group, ACT UP. In local communities and in Washington, D.C., members engaged in confrontational tactics in order to prod public officials to take more vigorous action against the epidemic.

Although the AIDS movement and the gay movement were not identical, the boundary between them has always been indistinct and permeable.

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Thus, the activism that AIDS had engendered also translated by the late 1980s into a more dynamic movement for gay and lesbian liberation. Locally, for instance, the pause in the passage of municipal gay rights laws yielded to an upsurge in the number of cities adopting such measures. State legislatures joined the parade, too, as several of them extended legal protections based on sexual orientation, and many more enacted statutes punishing hate crimes against lesbians and gay men. At the national level, activists participated in two key coalitions that brought them historic legislative victories in 1990: passage of the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, which mandated that the FBI collect statistics on hate-motivated violence, including crimes based on sexual orientation; and the Americans with Disabilities Act, whose provisions banned discrimination against people infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Other indicators of change were also emerging by the early 1990s. Mainstream news media were devoting more substantial coverage to the lesbian and gay community so that issues of sexual identity became woven into the fabric of what was deemed newsworthy. Out-of-the-closet candidates were running for political office and winning, while a few members of Congress who had been closeted were able to secure reelection after coming out. Campaigns to win legislative protection against discrimination were increasingly complemented by the efforts of employees in the workplace and through unions to secure on-the-job guarantees. Notions of equality expanded to encompass not just the rights of individuals, but also those of the family unit as gays and lesbians fought for domestic partnership recognition, legal marriage, and access to adoption. Finally, in 1992 a major political party for the first time nominated for president a candidate, Bill Clinton, who openly campaigned for the support of the gay community and promised to take action around issues important to this constituency. Within days of Clinton's inauguration, a gay issue — the military ban against homosexuals — moved to the front and center of national politics.

The 1992–93 political season also saw the opponents of gay rights coalesce into a more potent than ever political force. While the Democrats nominated Clinton, the Republican national convention of August 1992 witnessed virulent homophobic rhetoric and the incorporation of explicitly antigay planks into the party platform. That fall, in Colorado and Oregon, militant antagonists of the gay movement campaigned for voter approval of statewide ballot initiatives that would have repealed and prohibited legisla-

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tive remedies against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Early in 1993, a bipartisan coalition in Congress quickly took the initiative on the military issue away from the president, and the gay community suffered a major defeat. By the mid-1990s, the Christian right had built a powerful network of organizations that made fomenting fear of homosexuals a central element of their strategy.

THE CURRENT MOMENT[7]

In the wake of the military debacle, leaders of the gay and lesbian movement were forced to pause and take stock. On the one hand, there was no question that the community's quest for equality now occupied a recognized place on the political agenda. Issues such as workplace equity, marriage and parenting rights, and the responsiveness of the public schools to its gay students and personnel remained prominently in the public eye, as they were debated in local communities and state legislatures across the country. Especially in the realm of popular culture, a new kind of plateau had been reached. Particularly on television, but in Hollywood as well, gays and lesbians were becoming a standard fixture. No longer framed as monsters, nor relegated to an occasional walk-on role, they were increasingly a regular part of the social landscape.

On the other hand, there was a fractiousness to the debate about homosexuality that highlighted the lack of social consensus and that often produced political stalemate, contradiction, or both. For instance, by the mid-1990s, state capitols had become the site of ongoing legislative debate on gay issues, but the measures that were introduced and passed were equally likely to be gay-friendly or gay-hostile. Or, take the question of same-sex marriage. By the late 1990s, activists had succeeded in injecting the issue into the everyday consciousness of the society, so that, to many Americans, it came to seem unexceptionable. But, at the same time, conservative opponents succeeded in building against gay marriage a legislative wall so sturdy that the likelihood of legal recognition had actually receded. Even at the level of the Supreme Court the absence of consensus was striking. In the historic *Romer v. Evans* decision in 1996, a majority of the court ruled that gay rights laws cannot be banned. "A state cannot so deem a class of people a stranger to its laws," wrote Justice Anthony Kennedy, in a strong enunciation of elemental principles of fairness.[8] Yet even as it issued this decision, the nation still lived with the consequences of a decision ten years earlier, in *Bowers v. Hardwick,* in which the

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Court upheld the constitutionality of sodomy laws that, historically, have provided much of the justification for discrimination against gay people.

Without question, this overview has tended to flatten the story of the gay and lesbian movement. It offers a view of the forest and renders indistinct the wealth of detail and variety to be found in all the trees. It ignores, for instance, differences in regional experience; it gives scant attention to vigorous, often contentious, debates within the gay and lesbian community; it emphasizes general patterns at the expense of local particularity. But with these limitations recognized, the account I have offered does also provide a thumbnail sketch of the broad contours of change.

Cycles of Change

Students of American reform have long attempted to understand what provokes change in American politics, why some eras witness rapid mobilization of citizens and major alterations in policy, and what happens to social movements during "the doldrums," those periods of quiescence when a society does not seem responsive to agitation for change. One study of American politics has noted that change occurs "both incrementally and in bursts," leading the authors to conclude that a "punctuated equilibrium" best describes how new policy agendas get set and implemented. A study of feminism in the past generation has commented on the importance of understanding how social movements "endure," how there are periods when a movement seems to be "in abeyance," and other times when movements "change relatively rapidly."[9]

In looking at the history of the gay and lesbian movement over the past fifty years, it is abundantly clear that the velocity of change—within the movement and in the implementation of its goals—has not been steady. In fact, careful scrutiny suggests something very different. For the gay and lesbian movement, change has come in the form of alternating cycles of what we might colloquially describe as "leaping" and "creeping." Identifying these cycles, whose rhythms seem at first glance to be thoroughly unpredictable, can help us make sense of the course of the lesbian and gay movement. It may also contribute to a deeper appreciation of the processes of change in social movements more generally and in American politics as well.

The first leap forward came in the late 1940s and early 1950s and was marked by the appearance of the Kinsey studies of human sexuality, Donald

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Webster Cory's manifesto for homosexual rights, and the founding of the Mattachine Society. An awareness of oppression had crystalized in the minds of a few, and some of them had resolved to do something about it in a collective and organized way. But it was almost as if the effort required to launch a movement exhausted all the available political opportunity. For well over a decade, a small core of brave people crept along one very small step at a time. They were floating the new idea that homosexuals were the targets of unjust treatment. They were standing up for themselves, initiating a social dialogue, and experimenting with different kinds of strategies, but they could not succeed at much more than that.

The second great leap forward came in the handful of years around the Stonewall Riot. Galvanized by the radical upheavals of the 1960s and further inspired by the image of rioting drag queens, a cohort of young adult gays and lesbians adopted a stance of confident, almost defiant pride toward their sexual identities. They adopted the imperative to come out as the key element in the new movement they were building. And, taking the need for militant political action as a given, they targeted the key institutions that seemed complicitous in the oppression of gays and lesbians. Since many forms of institutionalized authority in the United States were wobbling as a result of a decade of protest, these radicals were able to accomplish a lot in a short period of time.

But the revolution that gay liberationists and lesbian feminists saw on the horizon never arrived, and for the next long stretch of time, gay and lesbian activists once again crept along. Incorporating both pride and coming out into the core sense of what it meant to be gay, these activists formed organizations, built community institutions, persisted in their efforts to affect law, public policy, and mainstream institutions, and generally maintained a higher level of visibility than their pre-Stonewall predecessors. What they lacked, and what the previous leap forward had not yet provided, were two key ingredients for a successful social movement: a mass constituency and an organizational infrastructure capable of successfully mobilizing it.

Coming in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the third leap forward was roughly bounded by the 1987 March on Washington and the debate over the military exclusion policy in 1993. Like gay liberation of the Stonewall era, activists in these years frequently used militant direct action tactics. But unlike the two earlier periods of leaping ahead, this one witnessed movement and community organizations sinking secure roots in every region of the

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country. The movement for gay and lesbian equality also shifted in these years from being a predominantly volunteer effort to one in which many organizations were able to hire paid staff. In other words, the resources of the movement expanded enormously in these years, and the results could be seen not only in an even higher level of visibility, but in the string of successes that were achieved at the local, state, and national level. Gay issues in this period became a permanent part of the world of politics and public policy, and gay people became a regularly visible part of American cultural and social life. But the failure to repeal the military ban in 1993 and the presence of an ever-stronger organized conservative force in American politics put the brakes on change before this leap could reach the longer range goal of forging a new majority consensus around the place of gays and lesbians in American society.

Something to notice about the periods of leaping ahead is that they cannot solely—or even primarily—be explained by the will, the grit, or the savvy of activists themselves. Rather, they are provoked by social or political turmoil that creates new openings for change or new motivations to act. The first leap forward occurred in the context of the intense social disruptions of World War II and the equally intense repression of the early Cold War. The second grew out of a decade of tumultuous political and cultural protest that threw into question many of the core beliefs of Americans. The third leap was a result of the sudden and rapid spread of a terrifying epidemic that made survival itself seem to be at stake. These upheavals admittedly did not in themselves lead to political gains for gay men and lesbians; the decisions of individuals to act were still necessary. But it is difficult to imagine these intense periods of concentrated progress occurring without some preceding dramatic circumstances. And, while it is probably true that societies can expect periods of disorder and disruption to recur, their timing and form are unpredictable.

A second thing to notice about these alternating cycles is that they seem to be characterized by different sorts of approaches to change. For instance, the moments of leaping seem tailored to radical visionaries willing to use bold, often militant, methods. By contrast, in the eras when a movement creeps along, militancy may work in very particular local circumstances, but as a general approach to making change the arts of dialogue and negotiation seem to dominate these times. Of course, some might claim that radical visions and militant tactics are themselves the causes of the shift from creeping to leaping. At some point the ideas and the model serve as inspiration for

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large numbers of people, who then initiate a period of dramatic forward movement. Or, alternately, some might argue that, if only the militants toned things down, the big gains made during an era of leaping might keep happening. But, as a description of *what* has happened, rather than as an explanation of *why* things happened, it does seem to be true that radical visions and militant action characterize the moments of leaping ahead, while dialogue, negotiation, and moderation describe the dominant approach during the longer periods of creeping along.

A final point to make about these alternating cycles of change is that each accomplishes something essential. It is easy to see this in relation to the periods in which a political movement leaps forward, but it might seem questionable about the far less dramatic eras of creeping along. Perhaps a climbing analogy will help: the eras of leaping are comparable to intense stretches of climbing upward to reach a new height; the eras of creeping represent the work of constructing a solid base camp so the *next* height can be scaled. In other words, what happens during the long stretches of incremental, almost imperceptible change, during which the landscape around us does not seem to vary, is critical for the future. The choices one makes during these periods will help shape how far ahead, and in what direction, a movement or a community is able to leap during the next period of tumultuous change. In the 1950s and 1960s, activists kept alive a young social movement: surely that is something worth achieving. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, another larger cohort of activists stayed out of the closet, built community institutions in which the message of gay liberation could be nurtured, and accumulated enough local victories to make change seem possible and desirable: certainly that, too, had value. In the movement's last leap forward, activists reached the goal of putting their issues on the table of mainstream politics and achieving sustained cultural visibility, a significant achievement. We are now in the middle of the next era of creeping along: what are its chief characteristics? What, in other words, are the current goals of the moment and what strategies have emerged to achieve them?

Goals and Strategies

Antigay ideologues often speak about "the gay agenda." In the way they use the phrase, a tone of menace often attaches to it, as if there is something self-evidently threatening or surreptitious about the notion itself. In fact, gay and

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lesbian Americans do have an agenda, although we might more profitably think of it as the set of goals toward which the gay movement is heading. Despite the wide diversity of the community, and the often fractious debates that occur within it, there has been over the past few decades an amazingly broad consensus about a core set of goals. It would be very hard to dispute the claim that the overwhelming majority of activists—and probably a large majority of gay men and lesbians—agree that the following set of goals are highly desirable: the repeal of sodomy statutes criminalizing homosexual behavior; the removal of the medical classification of homosexuality as a disease; the elimination of discriminatory provisions and practices at every level of government and in every institution of civil society; fair and accurate representation of gay life and gay issues in the media; due process of law, especially in relationship to the behavior of law enforcement personnel toward lesbians and gays; recognition of family relationships; and protection against hate-motivated violence.

"Broad consensus" does not, however, mean unanimity; it leaves room for wide disagreement about priorities and about the mechanisms to achieve these goals. Most gay conservatives, for instance, look askance at civil rights laws as a way of eliminating discrimination because they are philosophically opposed to the expansion of governmental powers, while many gays on the left have tended to underemphasize work to end the military ban. Political moderates and liberals see a single focus on gay issues as a sufficient way to go about eliminating homophobia, whereas gays and lesbians who define themselves as politically progressive emphasize the importance of linking the fight against homophobia and heterosexism to social movements fighting against racism, sexism, and economic injustice. There may be consensus that gay family relationships ought to be recognized, but for some this means the right to marry, and for others it means broadening our understanding of what constitutes a family.

If a goal describes a destination, strategy describes how we propose to arrive. Strategy can be simply described as the overall plan we have for moving toward goals beyond our immediate reach. Nations, corporations, sports teams, families and individuals: every unit of people from the smallest to the largest needs strategy. Strategies can be effective or ineffective (which we learn, unfortunately, only after the fact). They can be bold or cautious, simple or complex. They can have a shelf life of a week or a decade, depending on the goal.

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Above all, strategy is something that every individual, group, or institution *always* has, whether articulated or not. When strategy is articulated, it has a better chance of proving effective because its articulation implies that some conscious assessment of conditions has occurred, that human intelligence has been applied to the goals at hand. But even when strategy is not articulated, it can be discerned through the patterns that emerge after examination of the actions that individuals or groups make.

Thinking about strategy for a social movement is trickier than studying it at the level of the organization or, even, the nation. Corporations have CEOs, nonprofits have executive directors, and both have boards of directors. Policies get set and then carried out. A democratic nation, like the United States, has citizens who elect executives and legislators who then propose, enact, and implement laws. Organizations and nations experience debate, factionalism, and dissension from within; they experience conflict, pressure, and opportunity from without. But they also have boundaries, lines of authority, policies, and procedures that make them definable units of analysis.

But social movements? A congeries of organizations and individuals, social movements lack boundaries, lines of authority, policies, and procedures. Membership in a movement can be declared at will; participants can be responsible to no one but themselves. The frequency with which individuals are described in the gay press as "self-appointed leaders" in itself suggests how anarchic the gay and lesbian movement is.

Under these circumstances, is it even possible to speak meaningfully of strategy for the gay and lesbian movement beyond analysis of particular goals and campaigns? I think it is, though its discovery will not come by finding the one key manifesto or the joint declaration issued by major organizational leaders. Paradoxically, despite the apparently radically democratic structure of the movement, one can discern in different periods a quite broad agreement about a core outlook that constitutes in effect a strategic approach to change. This core outlook, or underlying strategic assumption, is most clearly evident during the stretches of time in which the movement is creeping along. Almost by definition, the periods of leaping ahead are characterized by such an abundance of restless chaotic activity that strategy seems too structured a concept to have much meaning.

The core outlook, or strategic approach, of the period from the early 1950s through the mid-to-late 1960s is best encapsulated by the phrase "give us a hearing." The phrase has the tone of a pleading in that action depends on

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the cooperation of individuals and institutions that are neither gay nor gay-friendly, but it also has the structure of a command, which leaves room for more militant approaches to the issue at hand. Either way, as plea or command, the phrase reflects the dominant fact of political, social, and cultural life in the 1950s and 1960s. Gays and lesbians were not setting the terms in which their lives were discussed or understood. Laws, institutional policies, the shape of social life, and the cultural representation of love, romance, and sexual desire: all presumed heterosexuality as normative.

"Give us a hearing" also efficiently describes the chief methods by which activists hoped to achieve what was the key goal of the era: to break the consensus that viewed homosexuality as dangerous, deviant, and wrong. Before Stonewall, almost all the energy of the movement went toward two activities: publishing material that would offer a counter to hegemonic views of homosexuality, and making contact with professionals in law, government, medicine, and the church whose views they hoped to influence.

"Here we are" effectively captures the core outlook for the period of creeping along that stretched from the early 1970s through the mid- to late-1980s. It suggests both place ("here") and collectivity ("we"). It takes the form of a simple statement of fact. But try to imagine the inflection in the voice: there is an insistence in the tone that suggests a mix of defiance, determination, *and* a lurking uncertainty as to how secure the place and the collectivity actually are. The urge to transform that uncertainty into a clear statement of fact explains the dominant strategic impulse of this era: a dual commitment to coming out and building community.

Among activists, coming out of the closet became the gay equivalent to a biblical injunction. Those who remained in the closet had a shadow cast over their moral character. Their integrity was suspect, their courage lacking, their identity uncertain. Meanwhile, those who had come out possessed a compelling need to have others join them. While it was emotionally liberating to drop the pretense of heterosexuality and reveal the secret of one's sexual identity, safety—and future success—demanded that the number of open gays and lesbians grow.

Security also seemed to require that gays and lesbians work intentionally toward building the institutions that could weld all these disparate individuals into a visible, cohesive community. The greater part of what men and women who considered themselves part of the movement did in these decades was directed toward creating and sustaining a public community.

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Whether they were socializing in or moving to urban neighborhoods perceived to be gay; expending a great number of volunteer hours staffing hot lines, health clinics, or rudimentary community centers; establishing small businesses like bookstores, publishing ventures, or vacation getaways; playing together in softball or bowling leagues or worshipping together in a church or synagogue: large numbers of lesbians and gay men in the seventies and eighties devoted themselves to the task of collective visibility through organizations and communities that held an aura of separatism, of incipient queer nationalism, to them.

The quest for visibility and community-building even drove the policy goals that were most avidly pursued from the early 1970s until AIDS seemed to overtake all other issues in the mid-1980s. The elimination of the disease classification of homosexuality, the repeal of sodomy statutes, the adoption of civil rights protections against discrimination, curtailing police harassment of gay meeting places and enlisting law enforcement in the effort to prevent violence against gays and lesbians: all these goals share a common insistence. "Leave us alone," they seem to imply. "Get out of our bedrooms and out of our psyches." "Put a stop to our mistreatment." If they were all achieved, the cost of coming out would be reduced dramatically. And they would make gay communities safer, thus accelerating the process of community building.

Coming out and community building have had enormous staying power as core strategic impulses. Both seem to speak directly to what is perhaps the defining feature of gay experience, the fact that almost all gay men and lesbians are neither raised in nor socialized at an early age into a gay community. The imprint of those critical years of isolation, especially when compounded by the historic invisibility of homosexuality in everyday social life and in popular culture, creates an insistent need for the alternative—for visibility and the connection that community provides. Hence, the great enthusiasm that greeted Ellen Degeneres's coming out in 1997 and the decision of some sectors of the movement to hold a great public rally in the nation's capital in 2000, despite the absence of a concrete political agenda that a rally might contribute toward advancing.

Yet even as coming out and community building remain powerful impulses, the current period of creeping along has seen a dramatic shift in the specific issues that are animating the gay community. Matters like civil rights

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protections and sodomy law repeal certainly remain on the agenda, but since the eruption of the debate over the military exclusion policy in 1993, the weight of gay and lesbian advocacy efforts have tilted toward a new cluster of issues: family, school, and work. The recognition of same-sex relationships either through domestic partnership arrangements, civil unions, or the legalization of same-sex marriage; the assertion of the right to parent, the quest for equitable adoption, foster care, and custody policies, and the need to have the law recognize that some children have two parents of the same gender; the proliferation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered employee groups across the country and their efforts to achieve workplace equity; the local battles over school curricula, the rights of students to organize gay-straight alliance clubs, the need for gay-supportive counseling and other policies in order to make schools safe places for students of all sexual identities: these, more than the old staples of the 1970s, have become the key issues in the gay community since the early 1990s.

The importance of this shift has been masked by the fact that the issues can be seen simply as new planks added to an old political agenda. But in fact they are qualitatively different. Whereas the issues of the 1970s revolved around a demand to be left alone, those of the 1990s call for recognition and inclusion. Instead of a core outlook captured by the phrase "here we are," the agitation around family, school, and work puts forward a different demand: "we want in." If the former appears as a simple statement of fact that can be realized through visibility and the creation of public communities, the latter demands both action and response. It requires, for its realization, a strategy of winning allies, of building support outside the community from the people—heterosexuals—whose lives too will inevitably be changed by the full inclusion of homosexuals in the core institutions of American society. It also suggests the distance that the movement has traveled from the days over a generation ago when it would have been thrilled just to receive a hearing.

Implications and Conclusions

In this chapter I have attempted to identify temporal cycles of change in the history of the gay and lesbian movement. I have also sought to align the periods of incremental change (what I have described as creeping along) with unifying strategic impulses. Though this analysis by no means accounts

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for the full range of activity or the various crosscurrents that inevitably exist in any period of time, it does, I believe, provide a reasonably accurate overview of the movement's history and political evolution.

It also suggests that the current moment in which we find ourselves—that is, in a third era of creeping along—displays strategic incoherence. In previous periods, goals, methods, and strategic vision worked in tandem with one another. Today, the gay and lesbian movement still places high value on a strategic vision that emphasizes coming out and community building, but the actual goals toward which activism is directed—goals around family, school, and work encapsulated by the outlook "we want in"—will not best be served by primary emphasis on coming out and building community. Access to and equity within the key structures of American life will instead require that winning allies becomes a priority. Coming out, of course, is a necessary precondition for this, but coming out has been so absorbed into the value structure of contemporary gay life that it hardly needs to be the movement's main rallying cry. As for community building, it can in serious ways work counter to achieving success in these other areas. Community building easily becomes insular and separatist. It can unwittingly foster an isolation and marginalization that runs contrary to the imperative of political engagement, particularly of the sort that involves winning support from outside one's own community.

These comments are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, I am making no judgment on the suitability of the goals that seem to be animating large numbers of gay men and lesbians in recent years. But, to the degree that success in achieving these new issues matter to their advocates, they will be better served by adopting methods of organizing designed to attract supporters and build coalitions. Otherwise, when the next moment of dramatic opportunity arrives, the movement will find itself too poorly positioned for a great leap into the future.

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