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LGBT Politics

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LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) Politics

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LGBT is an acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender”; *LGBT politics* refers to the issues, practices, policies, goals, strategies, and tactics deemed relevant, useful, or important to LGBT people within a broader, often non-LGBT, social and political context.

LGBT politics is difficult to define for a number of reasons. First, “LGBT” is a vernacular term that implies the universality or ahistorical existence of LGBT identities. Yet, for most of human history, people who engaged in same-sex sexual activity or forms of gender variance did not recognize themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. That many do so now is one *effect* of what is now called LGBT politics (Epstein 1987), a phenomenon that is only retroactively (and thus inaccurately) named as such when, for example, the twentieth-century US homophile movement is described as “gay activism” or nineteenth-century “passing women” are described as “transgender.”

Second, the LGBT acronym belies its status as a historical artifact engendered by broader struggles over identity and inclusion that have transpired over the course of more than a century. For example, “lesbian” was added to “gay” as both a critique of male dominance and a plea for gender specificity. “Gay and lesbian” became “LGB” when bisexual-identified people demanded specific inclusion *as bisexual* (with the “L” put first, in recognition of the historical oppression of women and lesbians) (Hemmings 2002). The addition of “T” proved particularly controversial, with LGB groups resisting inclusion of transgender people for fear that they would jeopardize LGB political gains (Valentine 2007). Yet each of these groups

first needed to *become groups* and then agitate for – and achieve – inclusion before the term “LGBT” could become commonplace usage.

Third, the acronym implies that LGBT people are automatic political allies or share a common political agenda. Yet none of these groups have always or uniformly been convinced that their identities – much less their political goals – were shared ones (Phelan 2001). More marginalized groups of LGBT people – by race, class, gender and sexual deviance, nationality, religion, or criminal or immigration status – have challenged the notion that sexuality or gender are most important and argued that centering these can produce a single-issue, “us vs. them” model of political struggle (Cohen 2005). Indeed, the language of LGBT identity has been critiqued as referring only to white people, and LGBT people of color in particular have disputed the assumption that LGBT people have a natural political alliance with one another regardless of other differences (Cohen 1999). Such tensions have led to consistent conflict among LGBT people about political tactics (e.g., lobbying vs. direct action) and goals (e.g., assimilation vs. liberation) (Epstein 1987: 47–8; Vaid 1995: 196).

Finally, the term appears to stabilize what some argue cannot be definitively stabilized: queerness or identity as such. Although “queer” is a potentially useful umbrella term under which the many sexual and gender constituencies can be grouped, some reject this abbreviation, arguing that queerness designates a dissident *non-* or *anti-*identity and a more radical politics than that demarcated by the homogenized, representational “LGBT” (Warner 1999). Others argue that identity is itself in flux, not necessarily self-same over the course of a lifetime, and/or so significantly a byproduct of discourse or historical power relations that it is an inadequate or problematic basis for a (thus misguided) representational politics (Epstein 1987; Butler 1997; Hemmings 2002).

These definitional difficulties pose challenges to political theorizing about LGBT politics. For example, it is questionable if what is called “the gay rights movement” can be accurately characterized as an ongoing, continuous struggle waged by historically similar and identifiable political and sexual subjects. Philosophically, it is questionable if LGBT politics can be theorized solely in terms of rights, equality, visibility, and the public/private distinction, features of liberal-democratic politics that may not adequately capture the range of activism engaged in by sexual subjects throughout US history and/or which have been explicitly challenged by them (Rimmerman 2002). These terms are also specific to US LGBT politics and do not necessarily travel well across global contexts (Massad 2002).

Typically, the “gay rights movement” refers to activist sexual politics in the USA dating from the Stonewall uprising in 1969. The more recent “LGBT politics” is a catch-all term designating any politics of representation on behalf of LGBT people, and is based almost entirely on the following premises: (a) sexual orientation and gender identity *are identities*, or fundamental modes of personhood, that have long been stigmatized, denigrated, and persecuted; (b) this widespread social hostility often makes it difficult for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people to realize and come to terms with their identities; (c) LGBT politics thus aims at removing obstacles to LGBT people’s ability to “come out of the closet” of silence, shame, and invisibility. Efforts focus on eliminating legal and institutional discrimination against LGBT people, as well as education and public advocacy about LGBT issues in order to create a more open, tolerant, and diverse society that values out, proud, and visible LGBT people, identities, and practices.

The history of what has come to be known as US LGBT politics can be broken down into roughly five periods: (a) the homophile movement; (b) gay liberation; (c) the AIDS years; (d) the 1990s; and (e) the twenty-first century.

The Homophile Movement

In 1950, former Communist Party member Harry Hay and a handful of other white men met in his living room to form what eventually became the Mattachine society, now often considered to be the first national gay organization in the USA. However, neither Hay nor his comrades understood themselves as identifiably “gay” and deliberately used the word “homophile,” rather than “homosexual,” as the name for their political organizing. Moreover, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people were neither part of this work nor recognized as falling under the homophile rubric. In 1955, led by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, women broke from Mattachine to form their own homophile organization, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB). Similarly, however, DOB did not recognize itself as a “lesbian rights” group and, like Mattachine, was largely a social organization.

Nevertheless, the very possibility of collective group identification around homosexuality was itself a historical development. In the earliest parts of the twentieth century in the USA, homosexuality was either not spoken of, or else delimited in terms of criminality, immorality, and sin. Yet, with the rise of the medical and psychological sciences, which classified homosexuality as a disease; the advent of industrial capitalism, which freed the family from its economic functions and transformed it into a primarily affective unit; and the social disruptions of World War II, which took Americans out of the nuclear family and into mass, same-sex milieus for the first time (D’Emilio 1983); same-sex sexual activity became more possible for many Americans than might otherwise have been the case. And, as public discourse around homosexuality increased – because of the obscenity trial of Oscar Wilde, the popularization of nineteenth-century German sexology, and publicity surrounding Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* – homosexuality became more available not simply for stigmatization and criminalization, but also for identification for those who participated in it. Ironically, it was

the very discourses of homosexual perversion, pathology, and criminality that paved the way for the creation of homosexual identity.

The homophile movement sought heterosexual acceptance of homosexuality and emphasized the overall sameness of homosexuals and heterosexuals. The term “homophile” was preferred for its emphasis of love over sex, and the main goal of the homophile movement was social respectability within the larger, heterosexual society. DOB and Mattachine often worked together, united in the shared goal of educating heterosexual society about themselves and seeking to improve their daily lives and well-being.

While Hay himself and many of Mattachine’s founding members had more radical aims, seeking to rouse homosexual consciousness by dispelling internalized self-hatred and recognizing homosexuals’ status as an oppressed minority, this Marxist-influenced political philosophy was at odds with the times, which were convulsed by McCarthyism and anti-homosexual animus. The Mattachine leadership’s connections to the Communist Party were deemed a liability by the group and internal conflict regarding it roiled the organization’s early days. Hay himself was eventually expelled from Mattachine and other communist-affiliated leadership left or were forced out of the organization.

In the 1960s, homophile activism became more militant and focused on the state and psychiatry, with the goals of decriminalizing and depathologizing homosexuality. Frank Kameny and others urged Mattachine and DOB to publicly break with the “sickness theory” of homosexuality that prevailed in psychiatry, medicine, and the law and adopt strategies similar to those of the civil rights and antiwar movements. The first public pickets by homosexuals for homosexual rights happened in 1965 in front of the White House and the State Department, a demonstration that scandalized large portions of the older homophile community in its public avowal of homosexual identity (D’Emilio 1983: 165–6). Controversy over political strategy and goals split both Mattachine and DOB.

Gay Liberation

The slow work of the homophile movement, its increasing militancy in the mid-1960s, and the overall climate of political protest in the USA at this time, provided the foundation for what has since become known as the founding moment of the gay rights movement in the USA: the Stonewall Inn uprising in New York City in 1969. Stonewall was not the first protest by LGBT people against police harassment (Stryker 2008: 59–66), which was routine in the often marginal spaces where LGBT people congregated – typically bars. But it “brought to a head tensions between East Coast postwar accommodationist homophile leaders and a more radical group of youthful activists who were inspired by the Black Panthers, the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, and early second-wave feminism” (Valentine 2007: 44).

That night, as police herded a bartender and patrons into police vehicles, a crowd gathered outside the bar and began spontaneously throwing bottles, cobblestones, and other heavy objects at police cars. A parking meter was ripped from the street and used to batter down the door of the Inn. The bar itself was set ablaze.

Rioting continued far into the night, with Puerto Rican transvestites and young street people leading charges against rows of uniformed police officers and then withdrawing to regroup in Village alleys and side streets. By the following night, graffiti calling for “Gay Power” had appeared along Christopher Street. (D’Emilio 1983: 232)

The use of the word “gay” in a phrase mimicking that of the Black Panthers – “Gay Power” – reflects the transformation of the more or less staid homophile movement into a self-avowed, militant, gay liberation movement. “Gay” became an all-encompassing term, including all sexual and gender “deviants” under its umbrella and signaling a commitment to a more radical politics of sexual liberation and freedom from gender roles (Valentine 2007: 49). Within a month, the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) had been formed and, almost immediately thereafter, the short-lived Third World

Gay Liberation. Gay liberationists saw themselves as part of the US antiwar movement, in alliance with the various antiracist, antisexist, and anticapitalist struggles being waged throughout the country, and in solidarity with anti-imperialist struggles worldwide.

Divisions ensued almost immediately. A more conservative faction rejected GLF's broader social justice agenda, breaking away to form the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), which focused strictly on gay issues through strategies such as legal reform. Lesbians frustrated by the male dominance of GLF (as well as the homophobia of the feminist movement) broke away to form separate, lesbian feminist organizations – groups that would later prove hostile to transgender and transsexual people (in particular, to trans women) (Stryker 2008). Transgender people, explicitly excluded from GAA, feeling unwelcome in GLF, and eventually expelled from many lesbian feminist communities, formed their own groups such as Queens' Liberation Front (QLF) and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), the latter founded by Stonewall veterans Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson (Stryker 2008: 86).

Like radical and lesbian feminism, gay liberation continued to thrive in the 1970s, despite the overall eclipse of other New Left movements in this decade. Its central emphasis on “coming out of the closet” as a radical act of political resistance and an embrace of the notion that “gay is good” (Jay & Young 1972: 2) was a rejection of the homophile movement and a decisive break with the characterization of homosexuality as shameful, perverted, and diseased. For gay liberationists, pride and “coming out” were crucial steps on the path toward larger, more radical projects of dismantling the two-gender system, the heteronuclear family, and the very notion of sexual orientation as such (Epstein 1987: 126–7). These aims and ambitions would nevertheless later be assimilated into a securely identity-based strategy of legal reform to attain rights for distinctly demarcated gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transgender) subjects.

Among its accomplishments, gay liberation can count the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association in 1973; the repeal of sodomy laws in more than half of US states; the election of the first openly gay person, Harvey Milk, to public office in San Francisco; and the inclusion, in 1980, of a gay rights plank in the Democratic party platform. The annual Pride parades held in many US cities each June are celebrations that originally began as marches marking the anniversary of the Stonewall uprising.

The AIDS Years

The end of the 1970s in the USA witnessed a conservative backlash that culminated in the rise of the religious right and the presidential election of Ronald Reagan. Even as gay liberation made gender and sexual diversity increasingly visible, campaigns such as the California Briggs' initiative to ban homosexuals from public school teaching and Anita Bryant's “Save Our Children” campaign opposing the inclusion of homosexuals in antidiscrimination legislation still had public traction. Although homosexuality was no longer a mental disorder, by 1980 “gender identity disorder” (GID) had entered the latest incarnation of the DSM.

Early in Reagan's term, people in urban centers suddenly began getting sick and dying from rare forms of cancer and pneumonia in a phenomenon the media and medical establishment termed GRID – Gay Related Immunodeficiency (Crimp 1988). Although not only white gay men were dying from these diseases (a small minority were heterosexual and many were intravenous drug users; a disproportionate number were people of color), the medical establishment immediately focused on the ostensible irresponsibility, promiscuity, and drug-laden “excesses” of the “homosexual lifestyle” of white gay men as the culprit for what came to be known in 1982 as AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (Epstein 1996: 47–50). Widespread homophobia among medical practitioners fed the confusion regarding the disease's epidemiology, just as its

discovery fed broader social homophobia regarding the perceived recklessness, selfishness, and perversion of homosexuals and seemed to justify religious claims that nonreproductive sexuality is or invites death.

The gay community was terrified by the rapid rate at which men were dying and shocked at the inaction of public officials, who called for quarantining AIDS patients when they bothered to comment on AIDS at all. In 1986, the US Supreme Court upheld the legality of anti-sodomy statutes in the case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, declaring there was no “fundamental right to engage in homosexual sodomy.” The surge of public expressions of homophobia, coupled with the spread of a life-threatening illness among gay men, had the effect of making AIDS central to gay people’s social identity, white gay men in particular (Epstein 1996: 53; cf. Cohen 1999).

At first, this identification of AIDS with gayness was resisted by gay people themselves, who rapidly formed AIDS service organizations (ASOs) such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis to provide medical and educational support services and engaged in public lobbying to secure funds for fighting the disease. While the pride impulse of gay liberation continued, the hegemony of public associations of homosexuality with perversion and death made pride in homosexuality difficult to assert publicly or feel individually. Pride was instead located in the community’s response to the crisis in caring for its own, particularly in the face of social stigma and government inaction (Gould 2009).

The slowness of progress in scientific research for a treatment or cure for AIDS, however, increasingly frustrated and angered the gay community. In 1987, the first ever Gay and Lesbian March on Washington was held, and thousands of people turned out for the event. The reservoir of energy and community generated by that march, along with ever-increasing fear, anger, and desperation at the mounting death toll from AIDS, led to the formation that year in New York City of the first chapter of ACT UP – the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, “a nonpartisan group of diverse individ-

uals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (Crimp 1988).

Lesbians were part of the work of fighting against AIDS from the beginning. This evidences the strong, shared, “gay” identity forged through gay liberation, which healed rifts between men and women of the homophile movement. Lesbian participation also evidences the fractures then taking place within the feminist movement in the USA, wherein lesbian feminism and antipornography feminism were being increasingly rejected by self-identified “sex radicals” who saw the AIDS fight as a fight against homophobia and a broader struggle for sexual freedom. It is during this period that the term “gay and lesbian” began increasingly to be used to refer to the “gay community” (Gould 2009: 67), although this referred to a predominantly white community. AIDS impacted communities of color quite differently and their responses to the AIDS crisis were not necessarily located in a visibly gay-identified network of leadership, advocacy, or service provision (Cohen 1999).

The 1990s and the Burgeoning of LGBT Identity

The fatigue and despair of AIDS activists at the seemingly endless crisis of a disease for which there appeared to be no cure and the emergence of a young Democratic presidential candidate from the South promising to increase AIDS funding, expedite medical trials, and end the military ban on homosexuals marked the beginning of a new and decisive chapter in the gay rights movement. Gays and lesbians of all political stripes were disarmed by Bill Clinton’s explicit engagement with them and their issues, which engendered unprecedented feelings of inclusion and, in the view of some, a willingness to surrender grassroots political agency to elected officials (Gould 2009: 415–19). The 1990s also marked the gay and lesbian movement’s political and financial consolidation through the emergence of a handful of well-funded national nonprofit organizations such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force,

the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF, today just HRC) and the Lambda Legal Defense Fund (Vaid 1995; Rimmerman 2002).

Clinton's 1992 election was attributable in part to "identifiably gay (and large) sums of money" (Vaid 1995: 126–7), which also gave professionalized gay and lesbian leaders unprecedented political access to Washington politics. The second national march on Washington in 1993

represented the full flowering of the mainstream civil rights strategy, as organizers self-consciously styled the march a gay version of the historic 1963 March on Washington, organized by black civil rights leaders. By 1993 we were a "bona fide" Civil Rights movement, having achieved the ultimate stamp of mainstream approval. (Vaid 1995: 106)

The 1990s simultaneously witnessed the distinct emergence of queer politics, where "queer" indexes both a call for greater inclusion as well as a rejection of mainstream gay and lesbian political tactics and goals. A legacy of ACT UP, which fell apart in the wake of Clinton's election (Gould 2009), radical activist groups like Queer Nation and Lesbian Avengers remained committed to disruptive political tactics and rejection of the heterosexual order. For others, "gay and lesbian" proved too limited a formulation of the gender and sexual variances that required political protection, and newly politicized gender and sexual minorities began organizing as dissident identity groups. Bisexual people demanded that gay organizations, pride events, and community centers name bisexuality explicitly and provide services and advocacy for bisexual issues (Hemmings 2002; Valentine 2007). Intersexed people began organizing as a self-identified group in resistance to surgical normalization of sex-variant infants (Chase 1998). The increasingly visible transsexual and transgender political movement sought access to health care from the medical and psychiatric establishments without the pathologization and gatekeeping that regulates such service provision to trans people.

The high hopes for Clinton's presidency were dashed, however, when Clinton failed to

keep his promises regarding AIDS funding and signed into law the now-notorious Don't Ask, Don't Tell military policy (DADT) and Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Such an astonishing turnaround can be attributed in part to the superficiality of gay clout in national politics at this time as well as to the vast gap between gay and lesbian legal and advocacy organizations and everyday gay and lesbian people – the movement's leaders simply had no grassroots support behind them (Vaid 1995: 129–33).

The Twenty-First Century

The gap between the elite leadership of LGBT organizations and everyday LGBT people means that the content of what has today come to be known as "LGBT politics" was determined by a very small group of wealthy, highly educated, white activist lawyers and professionals who crafted the agenda of the movement among themselves in the late 1980s and 1990s. Their successes have been enormous: this century has seen the overturning of the *Hardwick* decision in 2003, the repeal of DADT in 2010, and the fall of DOMA in 2013.

While the defeat of DADT and DOMA and the seemingly broad social acceptance of homosexuality are widely seen as major victories for the gay rights movement, radical queer critics find these victories to be token prizes that shore up privileges for a few and leave the vast majority of LGBT people behind. Neoliberalism has dismantled the social safety net, consolidated control of social movements in a few hands of wealthy donors to nonprofit organizations (Chasin 2000), and contributed to an overall upward redistribution of wealth (Duggan 2003; Spade 2011). Legal reform of marriage or military policy cannot address the harms faced by the majority of LGBT people, which include mass incarceration, deportation, racism, poverty, homelessness, inadequate access to health care, and pervasive violence. Critics argue that these should be the real targets of queer – not LGBT – political organizing. These critics also reject the politics of visibility, hate crimes legislation, and anti-bullying statutes, arguing these goals aim at

inclusion within existing state structures and institutions (e.g., marriage, the military, and the criminal legal system) rather than seeking to eradicate them or create new ones (Spade 2011; Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock 2012).

The agenda that continues to be set by elite LGBT leadership also focuses primarily on policies that require an increase in state surveillance and control without contesting the drastic reductions in state provision of social services. Grassroots queer organizations have attempted to set a different political agenda – groups like Fabulous Independent Educated Radicals for Community Empowerment (FIERCE), Southerners on New Ground (SONG), Black and Pink, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and the now-defunct Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ) (see DeFilippis et al. 2011–12).

LGBT Politics and Political Theory

Political theory has typically considered LGBT politics within the terms of liberalism and liberal-democratic theory (Phelan 2001) and restricted its purview to homosexuality alone, asking such questions as: should inclusion and rights be assigned to LGBT people because they are the same as non-LGBT people, or because their differences demand special protection? Is homosexuality an immutable characteristic, like skin color, or is it a choice, more or less constrained, but nevertheless akin to other kinds of agentic behavior, such as free speech and religious practice? Is homosexuality “like” race, gender, ethnicity? Are gay rights like civil rights? Is the gay rights movement like the civil rights movement or the feminist movement? Is homosexuality a matter of public morality, and therefore legitimately regulatable by the state? Or is it a matter of private practice, akin to religious liberty, and therefore worthy of protection from state intrusion?

As this entry has tried to demonstrate, such questions are most apposite to a specific period of US LGBT politics, dating from the 1990s to the present, when gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transgender) identities

became solidified and were explicitly mobilized as the basis of a representational, interest-group-based politics demanding specific policy changes such as marriage and adoption rights, antidiscrimination laws, and access to military service. However, these questions have neither constituted the sum total of LGBT politics in US history nor gone uncontested within LGBT political movements themselves. Moreover, these questions are not intrinsic to LGBT politics but, rather, dilemmas of liberalism, the terms of which have been repeatedly challenged by activist social movements.

If any question links the various historical periods of LGBT politics, it is the question of politics itself: should LGBT people seek inclusion and assimilation within non-LGBT norms, customs, laws, and institutions, or should they instead seek to eradicate these norms, customs, laws, and institutions through a radical liberation politics of systemic change (Vaid 1995; Rimmerman 2002)? Theorizing LGBT politics in terms that remain beholden to the rubric and categories of liberal political theory de-emphasizes the radical strains of LGBT politics that have emerged, in various forms, throughout history, and avoids the challenges these pose to the very notions of sexuality, gender, identity, and politics itself. These questions are taken up more explicitly within queer theory, which raises identity, gender, and sexual orientation as themselves questions of power rather than as problems for it.

SEE ALSO: Butler, Judith (1956–); Civil Rights; Politics of Identity; Queer Theory

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