



“THE POLICE WEREN’T LETTING US DANCE”: THE STONEWALL RIOTS AND THE EMERGENCE OF GAY POWER

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*“It isn’t nice to block the doorway. It isn’t nice to go to jail.
There are nicer ways to do it. But the nice ways always fail.”*
— Malvina Reynold (1964)

On June 28th, 1969, the Stonewall Inn became the site of the first in a series of unprecedented uprisings by the LGBTQ+ community. The rebellion erupted in retaliation to the New York City police department’s decades of consistent raids and arrests. While the NYPD’s usual practice was to tip off Stonewall Inn’s management before a raid, on the night of June 28th, eight detectives entered the bar in a surprise incursion. This unusually large body of force began antagonizing and arresting various patrons, spreading a wave of resistance among the crowd. In response to the percolating chaos, approximately 150 bar patrons fled, regrouped, and formed a perimeter, trapping the police inside the bar. The patrons-turned-rebels subsequently weaponized bricks, shot glasses, and garbage to begin what amounted to a six-night long clash between the gay community and the police, with marches, chants, and organized protests in and around Christopher Street. The events of that night and the week following the uprising are widely considered one of the most significant events leading up to the LGBTQ+ liberation movement and fight for gay rights in the United States. The momentum of this movement enacted the explosive activist pushback.

It should serve as no surprise that the LGBTQ+ community experienced police harassment and mistreatment in the decades leading up to the Stonewall Inn uprising. In the first half of the twentieth century, homosexuality in the United States was considered unnatural, immoral, and threatening to the comfortable social structure of the nuclear family. As such, homosexuality itself was pathologized as a psychological



defect by the American Psychiatric Association, which, until the year 1973, offered heinous treatments such as lobotomies, genital and chemical castration, and other means of attempted conversion. Furthermore, 1960s laws ruled that homosexual sex acts were illegal in every state except Illinois. The police force was tasked with ridding the streets of homosexuality, which thereby instilled fear amongst the gay community. Members of the LGBTQ+ community at midcentury feared losing their jobs, freedom, and family as a cost of being themselves.

However, in the 1960s the LGBTQ+ community would find allies in American leftists who were frustrated in their attempts to create radical change in the wake of the Vietnam War. Both these homophile activists and members of the Mattachine Society, whose mission was to fight for LGBTQ+ rights, adopted the language and ideology of minority rights. This strategy led to pro-gay rights groups becoming increasingly militant and unapologetic, and more significantly, celebratory of the homosexual lifestyle. As Simon Hall suggests, “The emergence of the direct-action phase of the gay rights movement owed something to the prevailing Zeitgeist. John F. Kennedy’s legitimization of social activism, the protests of the civil rights movement, and a wider flowering of activism all impact on the homophile movement” (Hall 2010, 540-1). The various civil rights movements of the 1960s had drawn national attention to the plights of the oppressed, and thus galvanized the activism from the gay community and their allies.

When police came to Stonewall, they didn’t find passivity. As a popular and safe bastion of the gay community, Stonewall was an easy target for raids. In fact, police would raid the establishment about once a month. The frequency of these police actions could lead one to think that the night of June 28th would be like any other. No one was aware that what would ensue would come to a communal fever pitch, and lead to a national uprising. Typically, when police arrived on the scene, patrons were asked to line up to be identified. Both management and attendant members of the community would then be arrested. On the night of the riot, a 26-year-old patron named Michael Fader watched in embittered astonishment as his friends and community were thrown into paddy wagons. He testified to his own budding frustration, later stating that:

We all had a collective feeling like we’d had enough of this kind of shit. It wasn’t anything tangible anybody said to anyone else, it was just kind of like everything over the years had come to a head on that one particular night in the one particular place, and it was not an organized demonstration. It was spontaneous. That was the part that was wonderful. (Carter 2004, 90)

The crowd outside of the Stonewall Inn soon grew angry and restless, feeding off the belligerence of the police, who slowly began retreating into the bar. What seemed like



thousands of people amassed around the perimeter, and inside, as Lucian Truscott recalls, the crowd erupted into improvisatory offensive tactics, heaving cobblestones and bottles at the building and shattering windows. (Carter 2004, 203) The chaos ensued – putting the police in a frantic state of mind, as they were being overpowered by the crowd. In that surrealist moment, you could hear the crowd shouting, “Gay power!” and “We want freedom!” (Carter 2004, 161).

The New York City media did not cover the Stonewall Riots in the way that addressed the nuance of the event. Instead, the mainstream media gave a more one-sided version that zeroed in on violence against the police. The daily news outlets even prioritized the police’s testimony, publishing articles focused on the plight of the police that evening. Offering little context of that night, city dailies such as *The New York Times*, *The New York Daily News*, and *The New York Post* published stories that centered police sources and perspectives. According to Chad Painter, “The story was framed as an instance of lawless youth run amok – an almost unprovoked riot” (Painter 2019). Painter also points out that in contrast with the mainstream reporting, *The Village Voice* printed a version of the story that “framed the Stonewall riots as an expression of liberation instead of rebellion.” (Painter 2019) *The Voice* later went on to become an important media outlet for marginalized groups left out of the mainstream.

The night of June 28th ushered in a wave of political action and social change that is far from over. The Stonewall Riot was, as the saying goes, death by a thousand papercuts. In other words, it was the culmination of years of building systematic pressure. The day revealed the oppressive impact of normative heterosexuality and the six-day clash between the gay community and police force pointed toward the need for social justice. Even though the name Stonewall itself has nearly become synonymous with the fight for gay rights, one must never settle with simply commemorating the event, as though the printing of Pride merchandise by conglomerate organizations overrides their capitalist implications. Now, as transgender men and women of color continue to fight for their rights – validation, job security, and psychological safety – June 28th remains a day that reiterates how the fire emblazoned by the uprisers from Stonewall remain as relevant as ever.



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