



Gay Liberation Front

by Geoffrey W. Bateman

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On June 27, 1969, a routine police raid on a gay bar in Greenwich Village ignited unprecedented rioting among its patrons. Throughout the weekend gay men and lesbians converged on the Stonewall Inn to protest the police and their abusive tactics.

Although homosexual rights activists had been organizing for two decades, the sudden explosion of the Stonewall riots ushered in a new gay militancy that soon became known as gay liberation.

A few weeks after Stonewall, gay and lesbian activists organized the Gay Liberation Front (GLF). Drawing on the principles and rhetoric of many other radical movements of the 1960s, GLF saw its mission as revolutionary and set its sights on a complete transformation of society. Not only did it hope to dismantle social institutions such as heterosexual marriage and the bourgeois family, but its leaders also forcefully opposed consumer culture, militarism, racism, and sexism.

Revolutionary Goals, Rapid Expansion, Quick Demise

GLF's statement of purpose clearly stated its revolutionary goals: "We are a revolutionary group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society's attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature."

GLF groups quickly spread to other cities in the United States and in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. Members of these groups did not limit their activism to gay causes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s many radical homosexuals joined protests with other radical groups, including the Black Panthers, women's liberationists, and anti-war activists.

Lesbians in GLF brought principles of radical feminism to bear on its emerging philosophy. GLF activists argued that the heterosexual family as an institution necessitated the oppression of homosexuals and defined gayness as a form of political resistance. GLF activist Martha Shelley wrote, "We are women and men who, from the time of our earliest memories, have been in revolt against the sex-role structure and nuclear family structure."

The radical organization Students for a Democratic Society also helped to shape GLF. Allen Young, a former SDS activist, was a key figure in framing GLF's principles. "Gay is good for all of us," he asserted. "The artificial categories 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' have been laid on us by a sexist society As gays, we demand an end to the gender programming which starts when we are born The family . . . is the primary means by which this restricted sexuality is created and enforced. . . . Our understanding of sexism is premised on the idea that in a free society everyone will be gay."

As an organization GLF was short-lived. It effectively ceased to exist in 1972. Fraught with internal division, GLF was unable to negotiate successfully the differences among its members. Many GLF activists remained

committed to working on a broad spectrum of political issues, while others wanted to prioritize issues directly related to homosexuality.

The Legacy of GLF

In spite of its short life, GLF's insistence on anti-assimilation politics offered gay men and lesbians, especially younger ones, an alternative to the quiet persistence of the homophile groups, such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, that had preceded it.

GLF also transformed the concept of coming out from a process that gay men and lesbians experienced privately and shared with only a small group of friends into a more strategic political tool. By encouraging gay men and lesbians to take pride in their homosexuality and to disclose it publicly, GLF helped craft an integral part of gay and lesbian politics that remains with us today. At the heart of the GLF philosophy was the idea that the personal is political.

For all its controversies and difficulties in creating a sustainable movement, GLF provided radical activists an important focal point for a few years. Even though many activists became disenchanted with the organization, their determination to carry forth the spirit of gay liberation through new groups such as the Gay Activists Alliance and the Radicalesbians proved invaluable in the continuing fight for glbtq rights.

GLF's legacy informed gay and lesbian activism throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s when groups such as ACT UP and Queer Nation formed to fight AIDS and homophobia. Many of the leaders of these two groups had been either active in or heavily influenced by the ideas first promoted by GLF.

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