

Stonewall and the Birth of Gay and Lesbian Liberation

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At 1:20 A.M. on June 28, 1969, eight officers from the Public Morals Section of the First Division of the New York City Police Department raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar located on Christopher Street, just off Seventh Avenue, in Greenwich Village. . . .

The raid on the Stonewall that morning followed the usual pattern of police harassment of gay bars in New York. The manager was served with a warrant for selling liquor without a license. Police ordered patrons to leave the bar; those who had no identification or who were wearing clothes of the other sex were to be taken to police headquarters. Usually, in such raids (four Village gay bars had been raided in the preceding few weeks), those given permission to leave would file out docilely to avoid further tempting arrest or exposure. However, this evening, instead of going home, the patrons began to congregate outside the bar. The mood was festive. As those "released" emerged one by one from the Stonewall—often striking poses and making campy comments—the crowd greeted them with cheers. *Village Voice* reporter Lucian Truscott IV (1969), who described the events in a front-page article headlined "Gay Power Comes to Sheridan Square," takes up the story:

Suddenly, the [police]wagon arrived and the mood of the crowd changed. Three of the more blatant queens—in full drag—were loaded inside, along with the bartender and doorman, to a chorus of catcalls and boos from the crowd. A cry went up to push the [police]wagon over, but it drove away before anything could happen. . . . The next person to come out was a dyke, and she put up a struggle—from car to door to car again. It was at that moment that the scene became explosive. Limp wrists were forgotten. Beer cans and bottles were heaved at the windows, and a rain of coins descended on the cops. . . . (1)

The police took refuge within the bar. Outside, someone uprooted a parking meter and tried to break down the Stonewall's front door. Someone else squirted lighter fluid through the window, followed by a few matches. From inside the bar, the police—clearly rattled—turned a fire hose on the crowd. A few minutes later several carloads of police reinforcements arrived and attempted to clear the street, but just when they thought they had succeeded in dispersing the crowd, people would regroup behind them, yelling, throwing bricks and bottles, and setting fire to trash cans. According to Martin Duberman's (1993) account (although the *Voice's* Truscott claims this took place the following evening), the police found themselves face to face with a chorus line of mocking queens, kicking their heels in the air and singing:

We are the Stonewall girls
 We wear our hair in curls
 We wear no underwear
 We show our pubic hair . . .
 We wear our dungarees
 Above our nelly knees!
 (quoted in Duberman 1993, 201)

By the time order was restored, thirteen people had been arrested.

The next night, Saturday, the police were back, but so were the crowds, and the events were already beginning to take on a more political character. Signs had been scrawled on the boarded-up front window of the bar: THEY INVADED OUR RIGHTS; LEGALIZE GAY BARS; SUPPORT GAY POWER. As the crowds faced off against the police, there were shouts of "Gay Power" and "Christopher Street belongs to the queens." Like the night before, the rioters threw bottles and bricks; the police charged into the crowd on two occasions, attacking the rioters with nightsticks. On Sunday night, things had calmed down somewhat. The Stonewall was open again; employees had managed to clear away the debris. Among the patrons was Allen Ginsberg, who was making his first visit to the Stonewall. That night, Ginsberg uttered his oft-quoted remark, "You know the guys there were so beautiful—they've lost that wounded look that fags all had ten years ago" (quoted in Teal 1971, 22).

It was the "Boston Tea Party of the gay movement," as the writer Dennis Altman (1973, 117) put it. It was "the hairpin drop heard around the world," as a Mattachine Society leaflet described it (quoted in Marotta 1981, 77). In just three nights, something had changed. And Judy Garland was dead. It was uncannily symbolic that the Friday the riots began was also the day of the funeral of the most beloved icon of the *Boys in the Band* gay culture that worshiped the tenacity of female entertainers like Garland but mirrored their helplessness as well. Twenty thousand people had stood in line to view Garland's body at an uptown funeral parlor. On the streets outside the Stonewall that weekend and in the days and months that followed, the "old" gay culture and the homosexual male that sustained it was (mostly) laid to rest as well. From now on, everything would be described as "pre-Stonewall" or "post-Stonewall." . . .

The gay and lesbian revolution was the stepchild of all the radical social and political movements of the decade—the student movement and the New Left, the anti-Vietnam War movement, radical feminism, the Black Panthers, hippies and yuppies. It began in New York but became international in scope. Soon London and Paris and Rome, Sydney and Melbourne, even Buenos Aires, would follow.

References

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 Marotta, T. (1981). *The Politics of Homosexuality*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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