

# **SEXUAL POLITICS, SEXUAL COMMUNITIES**

The Making of a  
Homosexual Minority  
in the United States,  
1940–1970

 **JOHN D'EMILIO**

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**For Estelle**

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# Introduction

Since June 1969, when a police raid of a Greenwich Village gay bar sparked several nights of rioting by male homosexuals, gay men and women in the United States have enlisted in ever growing numbers in a movement to emancipate themselves from the laws, the public policies, and the attitudes that have consigned them to an inferior position in society. In ways pioneered by other groups that have suffered a caste-like status, homosexuals and lesbians have formed organizations, conducted educational campaigns, lobbied inside legislative halls, picketed outside them, rioted in the streets, sustained self-help efforts, and constructed alternative separatist institutions on their road to liberation. They have worked to repeal statutes that criminalize their sexual behavior and to eliminate discriminatory practices. They have labored to unravel the ideological web that supports degrading stereotypes. Like other minorities, gay women and men have struggled to discard the self-hatred they have internalized. Many of them have rejected the negative definitions that American society has affixed to their sexuality and, instead, have begun to embrace their identity with pride.

From the beginning a curious inconsistency appeared between the rhetoric of the gay liberation movement and the reality of its achievements. On the one hand, activists in the early 1970s repeatedly stressed, in their writing and their public comments, the intertwining themes of silence, invisibility, and isolation. Gay men and lesbians, the argument ran, were invisible to society and to each other, and they lived isolated from their own kind. A vast silence surrounded the topic of homosexuality, perpetuating both invisibility and isolation. On the other hand, gay liberationists exhibited a remarkable capacity to mobilize their allegedly hidden, isolated constituency, and the move-

ment grew with amazing rapidity. By the mid-1970s, homosexuals and lesbians had formed more than 1,000 organizations scattered throughout the country. Many of these groups directed their energy outward, exerting pressure on legislatures, schools, the media, churches, and the professions. Activists proved capable of turning out tens of thousands of individuals for demonstrations, and they won impressive victories in relatively quick order. Many lesbian and gay male organizations also looked inward, toward their constituency. Activists created newspapers, magazines, health clinics, churches, multipurpose social centers, and specialized businesses—in short, a range of institutions that implied the existence of a separate, cohesive gay community.

Clearly, what the movement achieved and how lesbians and gay men responded to it belied the rhetoric of isolation and invisibility. Isolated men and women do not create, almost overnight, a mass movement premised upon a shared group identity. In combating prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices, moreover, gay liberationists encountered a quite clearly articulated body of thought about homosexuality. And, if lesbians and homosexuals were indeed invisible, the movement's leaders displayed an uncanny ability to find them in large numbers.

The present study began as an effort to resolve this contradiction, specifically by searching for the roots of the gay liberation movement in the political efforts of homosexuals and lesbians that preceded it. Militants in the early 1970s gave faint acknowledgment to the work of a previous generation, to the men and women who composed the "homophile" movement and who staffed organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s and 1960s. But, almost in the same breath, modern-day liberationists glibly denied the importance of their forebears. Mattachine had a reputation as the "NAACP of our movement,"<sup>1</sup> a damning description during years when groups like the Black Panther party were capturing the fancy of young radicals. When seen from a longer historical view, however, the comparison was intriguing since the NAACP, cautious and moderate as it may have been, had compiled over several decades a record of achievement that helped make possible the black civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Did the homophile movement play a similar role for gay men and women? Did its work perhaps prepare the ground for the victories of the 1970s?

As I researched the first phase of the gay emancipation struggle in the United States, it became apparent that its participants, and their work, deserved more

1. Quoted in Merle Miller, *On Being Different* (New York, 1971), p. 38. For a similar view of the homophile movement, see Dennis Altman, *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation*, Discus ed. (New York, 1971), p. 115. See Laud Humphreys, *Out of the Closets: The Sociology of Homosexual Liberation* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1972), for a more sympathetic view of the difference between gay liberation and its homophile predecessor.

than consignment to the dustbin of history. It is true, without question, that the homophile movement had failed to attract large numbers of lesbians and homosexuals to its cause. Nor had it succeeded in substantially revising the laws and public policies that kept them in a state of second-class citizenship. But at a time when heterosexual Americans appeared virtually unanimous in their disapproval, if not condemnation, of same-sex eroticism, the first generation of gay activists did open a debate on the topic. The homophile movement targeted the same groups and institutions as would gay liberation members in the 1970s—urban police forces, the federal government, the churches, the medical profession, the press and other media—and through its persistence managed to rupture the consensus that shaped social attitudes toward homosexuality and society's treatment of gay people.

Searching for the answer to one puzzle, however, only raised another, more vexing problem. Much of what homophile activists fought against—moral condemnation by the churches and the criminal status of homosexual behavior, for instance—had existed for centuries. Why, then, did a gay emancipation movement come into existence only in the post-World War II era? And why did it not become a mass movement until the end of the 1960s? One could point to the specific proximate causes of political activism, such as the publication of the Kinsey study of male sexual behavior in 1948 and the repression of the McCarthy era or, in the case of gay liberation, to the model provided by the radical movements of black and white youth and of women in the 1960s. But these explanations still leave unresolved the question, “Why not earlier?” The United States had experienced both repression and mass militancy in earlier periods of its history. Moreover, other groups—blacks, women, workers—had a history of resistance to oppression and exploitation that stretched back for more than a century. Why had homosexuals and lesbians not taken up their own cause generations ago?

The recent historical literature on human sexuality suggested a way of approaching this problem. Motivated perhaps by the much heralded sexual revolution of the 1960s, or by the challenges to sexual ideology that the contemporary feminist and gay liberation movements have posed, historians have begun to study the erotic life of men and women as never before. Borrowing from the work of anthropologists and sociologists, some historians have discarded the view that sexuality is primarily a biological category, an innate, unchanging “drive” or “instinct” immune from the shifts that characterize other aspects of social organization. Instead, as a number of writers have argued, eroticism is also subject to the forces of culture. Human beings learn how to express themselves sexually, and the content of that learning is as varied as the societies that women and men have formed through the ages. Particular erotic practices, from heterosexual intercourse to masturbation and sodomy, have a universal existence. But how individual men and women interpret their sexual activity and desires, and the meanings that different

societies affix to erotic behavior, vary enormously from one culture to another and from one historical era to the next.<sup>2</sup>

In studying homosexuality, some historians have begun to entertain the idea that human sexuality is a socially constructed, changing category. In recent books several writers have argued that "the homosexual" or "the lesbian"—that is, the person defined by society and by self through a primary erotic interest in the same sex—is a nineteenth-century invention.<sup>3</sup> Before then, in Western Europe and in the portions of North America populated by European settlers, men and women engaged in what we would describe as homosexual behavior, but neither they nor the society in which they lived defined persons as essentially different in kind from the majority because of their sexual expression. The absence of rigid categories called "homosexual" and "heterosexual" did not imply approval of same-sex eroticism. Men and women caught in such an act were severely punished, but their behavior was interpreted as a discrete transgression, a misdeed comparable to other sins and crimes such as adultery, blasphemy, and assault. By the late nineteenth century, a profound conceptual shift had occurred. Some men and women *were* homosexuals. The label applied not merely to particular sexual acts, as "sodomite" once had, but to an entire person whose nature—acts, feelings, personality traits, even body type—was sharply distinguishable from the majority of "normal" heterosexuals.

When applied to the topic of gay politics, this interpretation offers a new angle of vision that helps to illuminate both the timing and the course of the homosexual emancipation movement in the United States. The movement's history cannot be understood merely as a chronicle of how activists worked to mobilize masses of gay men and lesbians and to achieve a fixed agenda. Instead, the movement constitutes a phase, albeit a decisive one, of a much longer historical process through which a group of men and women came into existence as a self-conscious, cohesive minority. Before a movement could take shape, that process had to be far enough along so that at least some gay women and men could perceive themselves as members of an oppressed minority, sharing an identity that subjected them to systematic injustice. But before the

2. Some relevant social science studies of sexuality are found in Clellan S. Ford and Frank Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (New York, 1951); John H. Gagnon and William Simon, *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality* (Chicago, 1973); and Mary McIntosh, "The Homosexual Role," *Social Problems* 16 (1968): 182–92. For overviews of historical approaches to sexuality, see Robert A. Padgug, "Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History," *Radical History Review*, no. 20 (Spring/Summer 1979), pp. 3–23; and Estelle B. Freedman, "Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America: Behavior, Ideology, and Politics," *Reviews in American History* 10 (1982).

3. See Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London, 1977); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978); Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men* (New York, 1981); Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London, 1981); and Jonathan Katz, *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (New York, 1982).

movement could become a significant social force, the consciousness and the conditions of daily life of large numbers of lesbians and homosexuals had to change so that they could take up the banner carried by a pioneering few. Thus activists had not only to mobilize a constituency; first they had to create one. The fact that most of them remained unaware of this task did not make it any less critical.

The study that follows, then, is more than an account of the first two decades of the gay emancipation movement and less than a history of homosexuality in American society. Although the primary focus remains the story of a movement for social change, I have attempted to situate the growth of a gay politics within the larger setting of the evolution of a gay sexual identity and an urban subculture of homosexuals and lesbians. In Part I, I present the historical background of the origins of the movement. Chapter 1 describes the transformation of homosexuality, both conceptually and in its actual expression, from a sexual act to a personal identity; and it provides an overview of the sanctions and the negative attitudes directed toward men and women who engaged in homoerotic behavior. The next two chapters detail the events, roughly from 1940 to 1960, that helped shape an urban gay subculture and the modern forms of gay oppression. Chapter 2 focuses on World War II and the boost it gave to the formation of a collective gay life, while Chapter 3 examines the intensification of antihomosexual attitudes and penalties during the McCarthy era.

Part II chronicles the first decade of the movement, when a tiny number of people struggled simply to keep gay organizations alive. In Chapter 4, I look at the founding of the Mattachine Society by a group of leftist homosexuals. Chapter 5 charts the abrupt shift in the Mattachine philosophy from an emphasis on mass militancy and homosexual difference to a stress on political gradualism and the insignificance of sexual expression. Chapter 6 describes the founding of the Daughters of Bilitis and the historical specificity of lesbian identity and life. In Chapter 7, I assess the accomplishments and limitations of the homophile movement in the latter half of the 1950s, when its leaders adopted an accommodationist approach to social change.

Part III examines the homophile movement during the 1960s, a turbulent decade in American history. As I argue in Chapter 8, the "sexual revolution" of the decade extended to homosexuality, as Supreme Court decisions removed legal barriers to the presentation of homoeroticism in print and in visual media, and a bewildering variety of images and viewpoints about homosexuality appeared. This barrage of information made it easier for people to come to a self-definition as homosexual or lesbian, strengthened the institutions of the subculture, and gave activists more opportunities for action. Chapter 9 traces the growth during the early 1960s of a militant wing of the movement in the East where, influenced by the example of the civil rights effort, gay activists adopted direct action protest techniques. Chapter 10 focuses on events in San Francisco during the decade. There an unusual set of circumstances provoked the first important stirrings of political consciousness within the subculture of

gay bars, so that San Francisco's experience came to foreshadow what would happen in cities throughout America in the 1970s. Chapter 11 takes the story of the homophile movement up to the birth of gay liberation and assesses its success in ending the negative consensus about homosexuality. In Chapter 12 I describe the Stonewall riot and the emergence of gay liberation. Chapter 13 evaluates the role that the homophile movement played in fostering massive, grassroots activism among gay men and lesbians.

Identity, Community,  
and Oppression:  
A Sexual Minority  
in the Making





# Homosexuality and American Society: An Overview

On a Saturday afternoon in November 1950, five men convened at the home of Harry Hay in the Silverlake district of Los Angeles. They gathered to discuss a proposal written by Hay that had as its purpose “the heroic objective of liberating one of our largest minorities from . . . social persecution.”<sup>1</sup> All of the participants were members of the group they intended to liberate—America’s homosexual minority. Out of their meeting eventually came the Mattachine Society, the organization whose founding heralded the beginning of the gay emancipation movement in the United States.

Embedded in Hay’s proposal were certain assumptions that few contemporaries, homosexual or heterosexual, shared. Whether viewed from the vantage point of religion, law, or science, homosexuality appeared not as a mark of minority group status but as an individual problem, as evidence of moral weakness, criminality, or pathology. Nor would most Americans at that time have considered the treatment accorded homosexuals and lesbians a form of “social persecution.” Instead, it seemed to constitute an appropriate response to behavior that offended common decency, violated accepted norms, and threatened the welfare of society. Rather than liberation, Americans who thought about homosexuality at all, including many gay men and women themselves, would have preferred elimination. Earlier generations would even have been puzzled by the categorization of a group of people on the basis of their erotic behavior.

Untangling the jumble of facts that make up the early history of the gay emancipation movement requires a preliminary exploration of the elements

1. See “Remarks Made by Harry Hay to First Discussion Group,” November 1950, typescript, personal papers of James Kepner, Los Angeles.