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some queer anarchists
Stonewall Means Riot Right Now
What the Queer Uprisings of 1969 Share with the George Floyd
Protests of 2020
2020/06/28

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What the Queer Uprisings of 1969 Share with the George Floyd Protests of 2020

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the expense of its vulnerable members and everyone on the receiving end of racialized oppression. But the conflicts over policing and Pride in recent years, coming to a head this weekend in the context of COVID-19 and the Floyd protests, indicate a deep and growing rift—and the possibility of radical transformation. Perhaps queer people today, inspired by the courage of Black Lives Matter and recalling our own riotous history, are ready to revisit that choice.

This time, let's choose the right side.

From Stonewall to the Minneapolis Third Precinct: fuck the police forever.

the course of planning Los Angeles Pride, a massive outcry forced the organization to cancel the application and withdraw from the organizing entirely.

While Stonewall gets the most press owing to the Pride tradition it helped to launch, other gay riots such as the ones at Cooper's Donuts in Los Angeles and Compton's Cafeteria in San Francisco also offer important lessons for today's struggles. The most significant riot in the history of the US gay liberation movement since Stonewall took place on May 21, 1979, when ex-cop and politician Dan White was convicted only of manslaughter for murdering gay activist and politician Harvey Milk along with San Francisco mayor George Moscone. Thousands of gay rioters fought police, torched squad cars, and attacked San Francisco's City Hall. After the "White Night Riots," as they came to be known, a gay anarchist commentator evaluated the path forward in stark terms:

> Whether or not a newly reforged Stonewall Nation will rise out of the ashes of burning police cars depends on gay people, not their self-proclaimed "leaders." "White Monday" crystallized the situations: the line of demarcation has been drawn. One can side with the so-called "rioters" or one can side with the police—but there is no middle ground. A battle is raging all over this country, and it has been raging for years: a grim, silent battle largely unacknowledged except by its victims, given no publicity except when it erupts into the open as it did May 21st. On one side, there is the State—and on the other side there is the gay community.
>
> Choose sides.

Until recently, it appeared that much of the LGBTQ+ community had chosen the path of assimilation, collaborating with the state at

"Stonewall was a riot." In the 51 years since the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in New York City catapulted the movement for LGBTQ+ liberation into public consciousness, this phrase has become a cliché. Yes, it was a riot—but *what kind* of riot was it? On the anniversary of the iconic queer rebellion, many of us are reflecting on how today's struggles against police and white supremacy connect to past uprisings. Let's look at the resonances between Stonewall and the Justice for George Floyd rebellions and what these show us about how to catalyze resistance to oppression.

So what *kind* of riot was Stonewall?

Stonewall was a *violent anti-police* riot. It was a riot in which furious queers attempted to injure police officers and set them on fire in the course of fighting to hold territory in the street. It was not a dignified, militant, organized expression of the "language of the unheard." It was a violent, chaotic blast of rage against the institution responsible for inflicting so much cruelty and misery upon queer people in the city.

On the first night of the riots, at least four NYPD cops were injured, according to their own records. Protesters lit fires in trash cans, painted graffiti, hurled bricks and bottles at police, threw garbage in the streets, and destroyed a parking meter. To every "peaceful protester" today: if you insist that violent protest is always counter-productive, queer history is not on your side.

It was a *leaderless, multiracial* riot. There were no "demands." The events weren't sponsored by any organization. Contemporary claims that Stonewall was "led" by Black trans women or other identity-specific categories, while admirable in their efforts to redress exclusions from history, fail to capture the fluid, leaderless quality of the riots. While endless controversies swirl over who threw the first brick or the precise demographics of the crowds, the evidence we have from photos and contemporary accounts makes one thing clear: it was a fierce attack against the police carried out by a multiracial group of young queers, mostly male-assigned but

of varied gender presentations, without the sanction or direction of any group. Political radicals participated, but the majority of people in the streets were angry queers without any particular allegiance to any organization or ideology, fed up with the oppression they faced every day.

Self-appointed "community leaders" from the New York Mattachine Society criticized the riots. They installed a sign on the smashed up Stonewall Inn attempting to get the rebels to behave:

> "We homosexuals plead with our people to please help maintain peaceful and quiet conduct on the streets of the Village."

Why did the Mattachine—the most active gay rights group in the city at the time—want to prevent conflict with the police? In part, they wanted to because they had been engaged in negotiations with the NYPD for years, hoping to curb vice squad officers' efforts to entrap men seeking sex with other men. To their credit, their efforts had helped to substantially reduce certain forms of anti-queer police harassment. At the same time, they had established themselves as the mediators and representatives of the gay community vis-à-vis the police—and now the power they had built was threatened by ungovernable, outraged queers who refused to negotiate.

Stonewall was a *youth* riot. The young people who congregated in and around the bar—many of them hustlers or sex workers, many of them homeless or precariously housed—were some of the queers most aggressively targeted by the police and most severely exploited by the Mafia-driven bar industry and older, wealthier queers. The *New York Times* reported on the second night of rioting with the headline, "Police Again Rout 'Village' Youths," and most observers commented on how young most of the combatants were. As in the uprisings unfolding today, young people who had nothing to lose, who weren't held back by the hesitation or baggage of their elders, were the ones who pushed the struggle forward.

50 Years of Commemorating the Stonewall Riots

Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first marches commemorating the resistance of queer rioters at Stonewall. New York's "Christopher Street Liberation Day March"—the more depoliticized term "Pride" only caught on years afterwards—and its counterparts in Los Angeles, Chicago, and San Francisco marked the emergence of a trend that now spans the globe. The commercialization of corporate Pride™ festivals has been thoroughly critiqued by radical queers every step of the way. But while anti-capitalist sentiments, though widespread, were not foundational to the framing of Liberation Day or Pride marches in many places, resisting the police has always been an essential aspect of this history. While anti-capitalist challenges to corporate Pride continue, the struggle against police is intertwined with the very roots of our collective history, underscoring the contradictions of securitized, cop-inclusive Prides.

Since the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, conflicts erupted over the presence of police at Pride festivals in Toronto, Columbus, and several other cities. Last year, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, demonstrators in San Francisco shut down the parade in protest against the inclusion of police, while in New York, a large unpermitted "Reclaim Pride" queer liberation march offered a radical alternative to the NYPD-saturated mainstream parade.

This year in San Francisco, Miami, Chicago, New York, and many other cities, LGBTQ+ organizers are protesting, not partying, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. These events highlight the anti-police history of the event, explicitly rejecting police permits and any other form of collaboration with law enforcement. When a white organizer with Christopher Street West applied for a police permit for a "solidarity" march with Black Lives Matter in

Young people are taking the lead.

The Stonewall and Justice for George Floyd riots were catalyzed by the widespread participation of radical youth, largely acting outside the channels preferred by older activists and power brokers. Today, too, we should center the activity of rebellious young people—seeking to support their initiatives rather than attempting to direct or control them. Older generations with more protest experience can offer valuable skills and resources from street tactics and security measures to connections for bail money. But the responses we have seen from "movement elders" to both uprisings show that many of them will try to slow the movement down and redirect it towards conventional politics that recentralize their leadership—if we let them.

Resistance must be joyous.

The Floyd protests have varied widely in their character and tone, but as many accounts indicate, there is a widespread atmosphere of playful, passionate defiance alongside the mourning and rage. Music and dance have played a critical role in building the courage and energy of crowds, while the sharp-edged humor of meme culture has inspired creative signs and helped to spread the messages of the movement. Drawing on the critical role of music and culture throughout centuries of Black freedom struggles and picking up on the innovative blending of art and cutting-edge queer aesthetics by ACT-UP and other more recent movements, these demonstrations draw on a long tradition of joyful resistance to power.

Stonewall was *fun*. Queens danced a can-can line in front of the police in silly drag. Protesters ran around, flirted, camped, taunted cops, sang, and generally reveled in the exhilarating ambience of shared resistance. The culture of playful defiance that young street queers had developed over many years was an integral element of the riots, enabling them to overcome fear and violence and to give expression to their rage.

So there are important resonances between today's rebellions and the catalytic power of the Stonewall riots half a century ago. Both the gay liberation movement from 1969 on and the Black Lives Matter movements of recent years exploded into public consciousness in the aftermath of riots against police—not peaceful protests, not organization-building, not "winning hearts and minds," not mobilizing "allies." The characteristics shared by these two uprisings and the circumstances that provoked them offer useful insights for social rebels today.

Rioting can work where peaceful protest doesn't.

The striking thing about both the raid on the Stonewall Inn and the killing of George Floyd is that both events were *completely normal.* Raids, harassment, violence, and mass arrests of queer people were commonplace in the US in 1969; anti-Black violence and police murders are tragically ordinary occurrences in the US today. These explosions did not take place because the injustices that prompted them were exceptional. Neither straight society in 1969 nor white society in 2020 suddenly took note of homophobic and racist police violence because something had changed about the violence itself.

And neither of these uprisings were the first time that activists had protested the injustice in question. In New York City, activists had been working to curb police harassment for years by 1969;

small protests had begun to take place in other cities over anti-gay police harassment. Likewise, protests against racist police violence have broken out consistently across the US for many years.

What changed? In both the Stonewall riots and the Justice for George Floyd demonstrations, the difference was that protesters began using tactics that interrupted law and order, respectability, non-violence, and permission from authorities. In so doing, they were violating the norms set by both society at large and their own movements. Only by *physically fighting back against the police* in New York and in Minneapolis did rioters manage to force those who hold power to prioritize addressing their grievances. Only by successfully confronting the police with force did they inspire the defiant resistance that spread like wildfire across the country, permanently changing the context in which Americans understood gay and Black life.

Leaderless, multiracial movements are powerful.

Within a week of the murder of George Floyd, solidarity protests had taken place in all 50 of the United States—and soon after, in over 50 countries worldwide. This occurred thanks to the autonomous initiative of countless ordinary people, many of whom were not connected to formal organizations and activist networks, who wanted to show support for the rebels in Minneapolis and to contest racism and police power locally. In many places, multiple demonstrations took place on the same day, allowing people to participate whenever and wherever they were able to and to choose their preferred tactics, degree of risk, and political framing. This decentralization and absence of formal leadership has maximized participation and minimized the risk of coordinated repression as countless forms of resistance have emerged from the many-headed hydra of the movement.

This echoes the proliferation of Gay Liberation Front chapters that exploded across the US in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots. Literally hundreds of groups sprang up in 1969 and 1970, many in places where no gay organization had ever existed; while many were short-lived, they helped to radicalize an entire generation of young gay and lesbian people, exponentially expanding the visibility of the community and the forms of activism that were emerging from it. While national organizations gradually emerged later in the 1970s and 1980s, redirecting grassroots energy towards lobbying and centralized political campaigns, the LGBTQ+ movement has remained stubbornly decentralized with a great deal of local variation and avenues for grassroots participation everywhere.

Within a year of the Stonewall riots, many participants in the Gay Liberation Front who were frustrated by the entrenched sexist, anti-trans*, and racist attitudes they encountered in the new groups split off to form lesbian feminist, trans*, and/or Third World/people of color-specific queer organizations. In today's age of intersectional politics, more people acknowledge and prioritize these problems; LGBTQ+ organizations in particular are highlighting and centering Black struggles and the struggles of other people of color. The Black Lives Matter movement has learned from critiques of previous Black liberation struggles, integrating a focus on gender and sexuality and intra-community differences into their organizing, which has incalculably strengthened the demonstrations.

While many observers have remarked on the multiracial character of the demonstrations across the US since Floyd's murder, significant disagreements persist over how to understand the dynamics between participants positioned differently in relation to white supremacy and anti-Black violence. Whether as "allies" or accomplices, as followers of Black leadership or autonomous rebels seeking their own liberation, white and other non-Black protesters should seek to build ongoing relationships of trust with Black rebels as we develop new models for struggle.