

Other indicators of change were also emerging by the early 1990s. Mainstream news media were devoting more substantial coverage to the lesbian and gay community so that issues of sexual identity became woven into the fabric of what was deemed newsworthy (Alwood 1996, chap. 14). Out-of-the-closet candidates were running for political office and winning, while a few members of Congress who had been closeted were able to secure reelection after coming out (DeBold 1994). Campaigns to win legislative protection against discrimination were increasingly complemented by the efforts of employees in the workplace and through unions to secure on-the-job guarantees. Notions of equality expanded to encompass not just the rights of individuals, but also those of the family unit as gays and lesbians fought for domestic partnership recognition, legal marriage, and access to adoption. Finally, in 1992 a major political party for the first time nominated for president a candidate, Bill Clinton, who openly campaigned for the support of the gay community and promised to take action around issues important to this constituency. And, within days of Clinton's inauguration, a gay issue—the military ban against homosexuals—moved to the front and center of national politics (Mixner 1996).

The 1992–93 political season also saw the opponents of gay rights coalesce into a political force more potent than ever. While the Democrats nominated Clinton, the Republican national convention of August 1992 witnessed virulent homophobic rhetoric and the incorporation of explicitly antigay planks into the party platform. That fall, in Colorado and Oregon, militant antagonists of the gay movement campaigned for voter approval of statewide ballot initiatives that would have repealed and prohibited legislative remedies against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Early in 1993, a bipartisan coalition in Congress quickly took the initiative on the military issue away from the president and the gay community suffered a major defeat. By the mid-1990s, the Christian Right had built a powerful network of organizations that made fomenting fear of homosexuals a central element of their strategy (Bull and Gallagher 1996).

The Current Moment

In the wake of the military debacle, leaders of the gay and lesbian movement were forced to pause and take stock. On the one hand, there was no question that the community's quest for equality now occupied a recognized place on the political agenda. Issues such as workplace equity, marriage and parenting rights, and the responsiveness of the public schools to its gay students and personnel remained prominently in the public eye, as

they were debated in local communities and state legislatures across the country. Especially in the realm of popular culture, a new kind of plateau had been reached. Particularly on television, but in Hollywood as well, gays and lesbians were becoming a standard fixture. No longer framed as monsters, nor relegated to an occasional walk-on role, they were increasingly a regular part of the social landscape.

On the other hand, there was a fractiousness to the debate about homosexuality that highlighted the lack of social consensus and that often produced political stalemate, contradiction, or both. For instance, by the mid-1990s, state capitols had become the site of ongoing legislative debate on gay issues, but the measures that were introduced and passed were equally likely to be gay-friendly or gay-hostile (NGLTF 1997; 1998). Even at the level of the Supreme Court the absence of consensus was striking. In the historic *Romer v. Evans* decision in 1996, a majority of the court ruled that gay rights laws cannot be banned. "A state cannot so deem a class of people a stranger to its laws," wrote Justice Anthony Kennedy, in a strong enunciation of elemental principles of fairness (Eskridge and Hunter 1997, 93). Yet even as it issued this decision, the nation still lived with the consequences of a decision ten years earlier, in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, in which the Court upheld the constitutionality of sodomy laws that, historically, have provided much of the justification for discrimination against gay people (Rubinstein 1993, 132).

Without question, this overview has tended to flatten the story of the gay and lesbian movement. It offers a view of the forest, and renders indistinct the wealth of detail and variety to be found in all the trees. It ignores, for instance, differences in regional experience; it gives scant attention to vigorous, often contentious, debates within the gay and lesbian community; it emphasizes general patterns at the expense of local particularity. But with these limitations recognized, the account I have offered does also provide a thumbnail sketch of the broad contours of change.

CYCLES OF CHANGE

Students of American reform have long attempted to understand what provokes change in American politics, why some eras witness rapid mobilization of citizens and major alterations in policy, and what happens to social movements during "the doldrums," those periods of quiescence when a society does not seem responsive to agitation for change (Rupp and Taylor 1987). One study of American politics has noted that change occurs "both incrementally and in bursts," leading the authors to conclude

that a "punctuated equilibrium" best describes how new policy agendas get set and implemented (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 235–36). A study of feminism in the last generation has commented on the importance of understanding how social movements "endure," how there are periods when a movement seems to be "in abeyance" and other times when movements "change relatively rapidly" (Whittier 1995, 255–57).

In looking at the history of the gay and lesbian movement over the last fifty years, it is abundantly clear that the velocity of change—within the movement and in the implementation of its goals—has not been steady. In fact, careful scrutiny suggests something very different. For the gay and lesbian movement, change has come in the form of alternating cycles of what we might colloquially describe as "leaping" and "creeping." Identifying these cycles, whose rhythms seem at first glance to be thoroughly unpredictable, can help us make sense of the course of the lesbian and gay movement. It may also contribute to a deeper appreciation of the processes of change in social movements more generally and in American politics as well.

The first leap forward came in the late 1940s and early 1950s and was marked by the appearance of the Kinsey studies of human sexuality, Donald Webster Cory's manifesto for homosexual rights, and the founding of the Mattachine Society. An awareness of oppression had crystallized in the minds of a few, and some of them had resolved to do something about it in a collective and organized way. But it was almost as if the effort required to launch a movement exhausted all of the available political opportunity. For well over a decade, a small core of brave people crept along, one very small step at a time. They were floating the new idea that homosexuals were the targets of unjust treatment. They were standing up for themselves, initiating a social dialogue, and experimenting with different kinds of strategies, but they could not succeed at much more than that.

The second great leap forward came in the handful of years around the Stonewall Riot. Galvanized by the radical upheavals of the 1960s and further inspired by the image of rioting drag queens, a cohort of young adult gays and lesbians adopted a stance of confident, almost defiant pride toward their sexual identities. They adopted the imperative to come out as the key element in the new movement they were building. And, taking the need for militant political action as a given, they targeted the key institutions that seemed complicitous in the oppression of gays and lesbians. Since many forms of institutionalized authority in the United States were wobbling as a result of a decade of protest, these gay radicals were able to accomplish a lot in a short period of time.

But the revolution that gay liberationists and lesbian feminists saw on the horizon never arrived, and for the next long stretch of time, gay and lesbian activists once again crept along. Incorporating both pride and coming out into the core sense of what it meant to be gay, these activists formed organizations, built community institutions, persisted in their efforts to affect law, public policy, and mainstream institutions, and generally maintained a higher level of visibility than their pre-Stonewall predecessors. What they lacked, and what the previous leap forward had not yet provided, were two key ingredients for a successful social movement: a mass constituency and an organizational infrastructure capable of successfully mobilizing it.

Coming in the wake of the AIDS epidemic, the third leap forward was roughly bounded by the 1987 March on Washington and the debate over the military exclusion policy in 1993. Like gay liberation of the Stonewall era, activists in these years frequently used militant direct action tactics. But unlike the two earlier periods of leaping ahead, this one witnessed movement and community organizations sinking secure roots in every region of the country. The movement for gay and lesbian equality also shifted in these years from being a predominantly volunteer effort to one in which many organizations were able to hire paid staff. In other words, the resources of the movement expanded enormously in these years, and the results could be seen not only in an even higher level of visibility, but in the string of successes that were achieved at the local, state, and national level. Gay issues in this period became a permanent part of the world of politics and public policy, and gay people became a regularly visible part of American cultural and social life. But the failure to repeal the military ban in 1993 and the presence of an ever-stronger organized conservative force in American politics put the brakes on change before this leap could reach the longer range goal of forging a new majority consensus around the place of gays and lesbians in American society.

Something to notice about the periods of leaping ahead is that they cannot solely—or even primarily—be explained by the will, the grit, or the savvy of activists themselves. Rather, they are provoked by social or political turmoil that creates new openings for change, or new motivations to act. The first leap forward occurred in the context of the intense social disruptions of World War II and the equally intense repression of the early Cold War. The second grew out of a decade of tumultuous political and cultural protest that threw into question many of the core beliefs of Americans. The third leap was a result of the sudden and rapid spread of a

terrifying epidemic that made survival itself seem to be at stake. These upheavals admittedly did not in themselves lead to political gains for gay men and lesbians; the decisions of individuals to act were still necessary. But it is difficult to imagine these intense periods of concentrated progress occurring without some preceding dramatic circumstances. And, while it is probably true that societies can expect periods of disorder and disruption to recur, their timing and form are unpredictable.

A second thing to notice about these alternating cycles is that they seem to be characterized by different sorts of approaches to change. For instance, the moments of leaping seem tailored to radical visionaries willing to use bold, often militant, methods. By contrast, in the eras when a movement creeps along, militancy may work in very particular local circumstances, but as a general approach to making change the arts of dialogue and negotiation seem to dominate these times. Of course, some might claim that radical visions and militant tactics are themselves the causes of the shift from creeping to leaping. At some point the ideas and the model serve as inspiration for large numbers of people, who then initiate a period of dramatic forward movement. Or, alternately, some might argue that, if only the militants toned things down, the big gains made during an era of leaping might keep happening. But, as a description of what has happened, rather than as an explanation of why things happened, it does seem to be true that radical visions and militant action characterize the moments of leaping ahead, while dialogue, negotiation, and moderation describe the dominant approach during the longer periods of creeping along.

A final point to make about these alternating cycles of change is that each accomplishes something essential. It is easy to see this in relation to the periods in which a political movement leaps forward, but it might seem questionable about the far less dramatic eras of creeping along. Perhaps a climbing analogy will help: the eras of leaping are comparable to intense stretches of climbing upward to reach a new height; the eras of creeping represent the work of constructing a solid base camp so the next height can be scaled. In other words, what happens during the long stretches of incremental, almost imperceptible change, during which the landscape around us does not seem to vary, is critical for the future. The choices one makes during these periods will help shape how far ahead, and in what direction, a movement or a community is able to leap during the next period of tumultuous change. In the 1950s and 1960s, activists kept alive a young social movement: surely that is something worth achieving. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, another larger cohort of activists stayed out

of the closet, built community institutions in which the message of gay liberation could be nurtured, and accumulated enough local victories to make change seem possible and desirable: certainly that, too, had value. In the movement's last leap forward, activists reached the goal of putting their issues on the table of mainstream politics and achieving sustained cultural visibility, a significant achievement. We are now in the middle of the next era of creeping along: what are its chief characteristics? What, in other words, are the current goals of the moment and what strategies have emerged to achieve them?

GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Antigay ideologues often speak about "the gay agenda." In the way they use the phrase, a tone of menace often attaches to it, as if there is something self-evidently threatening or surreptitious about the notion itself. In fact, gay and lesbian Americans do have an agenda, although we might more profitably think of it as the set of goals toward which the gay movement is heading. Despite the wide diversity of the gay and lesbian community, and the often fractious debates that occur within it, there has been over the last few decades an amazingly broad consensus about a core set of goals. It would be very hard to dispute the claim that the overwhelming majority of activists—and probably a large majority of gay men and lesbians—agree that the following set of goals are highly desirable: the repeal of sodomy statutes criminalizing homosexual behavior; the removal of the medical classification of homosexuality as a disease; the elimination of discriminatory provisions and practices at every level of government and in every institution of civil society; fair and accurate representation of gay life and gay issues in the media; due process of law, especially in relationship to the behavior of law enforcement personnel toward lesbians and gays; recognition of family relationships; and protection against hate-motivated violence.

"Broad consensus" does not, however, mean unanimity; it leaves room for wide disagreement about priorities and about the mechanisms to achieve these goals. Most gay conservatives, for instance, look askance at civil rights laws as a way of eliminating discrimination because they are philosophically opposed to the expansion of governmental powers, while many gays on the left have tended to underemphasize work to end the military ban. Political moderates and liberals see a single focus on gay issues as a sufficient way to go about eliminating homophobia, whereas gays and lesbians who define themselves as politically progressive emphasize the

importance of linking the fight against homophobia and heterosexism to social movements fighting against racism, sexism, and economic injustice. There may be consensus that gay family relationships ought to be recognized, but for some this means the right to marry, and for others it means broadening our understanding of what constitutes a family.

If a goal describes a destination, strategy describes how we propose to arrive. Strategy can be simply described as the overall plan we have for moving toward goals beyond our immediate reach. Nations, corporations, sports teams, families, individuals: every unit of people from the smallest to the largest needs strategy. Strategies can be effective or ineffective (which we learn, unfortunately, only after the fact); they can be bold or cautious, simple or complex; they can have a shelf life of a week or a decade, depending on the goal.

Above all, strategy is something that every individual, group, or institution always has, whether articulated or not. When strategy is articulated, it has a better chance of proving effective because its articulation implies that some conscious assessment of conditions has occurred, that human intelligence has been applied to the goals at hand. But even when strategy is not articulated, it can be discerned through the patterns that emerge upon examination of the actions that individuals or groups make.

Thinking about strategy for a social movement is trickier than studying it at the level of the organization or, even, the nation. Corporations have CEOs, nonprofits have executive directors, and both have boards of directors. Policies get set and then carried out. A democratic nation, like the United States, has citizens who elect legislatures and executives who then propose, enact, and execute laws. Organizations and nations experience debate, factionalism, and dissension from within; they experience conflict, pressure, and opportunity from without. But they also have boundaries, lines of authority, policies, and procedures which make them definable units of analysis.

But social movements? A congeries of organizations and individuals, social movements lack boundaries, lines of authority, policies, and procedures. Membership in a movement can be declared at will; participants can be responsible to no one but themselves. The frequency with which individuals are described in the gay press as "self-appointed leaders" in itself suggests how anarchic the gay and lesbian movement is.

Under these circumstances, is it even possible to speak meaningfully of strategy for the gay and lesbian movement beyond analysis of particular goals and campaigns? I think it is, though its discovery will not come by

finding the one key manifesto or the joint declaration issued by major organizational leaders. Paradoxically, despite the apparently radically democratic structure of the movement, one can discern in different periods a quite broad agreement about a core outlook that constitutes in effect a strategic approach to change. This core outlook, or underlying strategic assumption, is most clearly evident during the stretches of time in which the movement is creeping along. Almost by definition, the periods of leaping ahead are characterized by such an abundance of restless chaotic activity that strategy seems too structured a concept to have much meaning.

The core outlook, or strategic approach, of the period from the early 1950s through the mid-to-late 1960s is best encapsulated by the phrase "give us a hearing." The phrase has the tone of a pleading in that action depends on the cooperation of individuals and institutions that are neither gay nor gay-friendly, but it also has the structure of a command, which leaves room for more militant approaches to the issue at hand. Either way, as plea or command, the phrase reflects the dominant fact of political, social, and cultural life in the 1950s and 1960s. Gays and lesbians were not setting the terms in which their lives were discussed or understood. Laws, institutional policies, the shape of social life, and the cultural representation of love, romance, and sexual desire: all presumed heterosexuality as normative.

"Give us a hearing" also efficiently describes the chief methods by which activists hoped to achieve what was the key goal of the era: to break the consensus that viewed homosexuality as dangerous, deviant, and wrong. Before Stonewall, almost all the energy of the movement went toward two activities: publishing material that would offer a counter to hegemonic views of homosexuality, and making contact with professionals in law, government, medicine, and the church whose views they hoped to influence.

"Here we are" effectively captures the core outlook for the period of creeping along that stretched from the early 1970s through the mid-to-late 1980s. It suggests both place ("here") and collectivity ("we"). It takes the form of a simple statement of fact. But try to imagine the inflection in the voice: there is an insistence in the tone that suggests a mix of defiance, determination, and a lurking uncertainty as to how secure the place and the collectivity actually are. The urge to transform that uncertainty into a clear statement of fact explains the dominant strategic impulse of this era: a dual commitment to coming out and building community.

Among activists, coming out of the closet became the gay equivalent to a biblical injunction. Those who remained in the closet had a shadow cast

over their moral character. Their integrity was suspect, their courage lacking, their identity uncertain. Meanwhile, those who had come out possessed a compelling need to have others join them. While it was emotionally liberating to drop the pretense of heterosexuality and reveal the secret of one's sexual identity, safety—and future success—demanded that the number of open gays and lesbians grow.

Security also seemed to require that gays and lesbians work intentionally toward building the institutions that could weld all these disparate individuals into a visible, cohesive community. The greater part of what men and women who considered themselves part of the movement did in these decades was directed toward creating and sustaining a public community. Whether they were socializing in or moving to urban neighborhoods perceived to be gay; expending a great number of volunteer hours staffing hot lines, health clinics, or rudimentary community centers; establishing small businesses like bookstores, publishing ventures, or vacation getaways; playing together in softball or bowling leagues or worshipping together in a church or synagogue: large numbers of lesbians and gay men in the 1970s and 1980s devoted themselves to the task of collective visibility through organizations and communities that held an aura of separatism, of incipient queer nationalism, to them.

The quest for visibility and community-building even drove the policy goals that were most avidly pursued from the early 1970s until AIDS seemed to overtake all other issues in the mid-1980s. The elimination of the disease classification of homosexuality, the repeal of sodomy statutes, the adoption of civil rights protections against discrimination, curtailing police harassment of gay meeting places and enlisting law enforcement in the effort to prevent violence against gays and lesbians: all of these goals share a common insistence. "Leave us alone," they seem to imply. Get out of our bedrooms and out of our psyches. "Put a stop to our mistreatment." If they were all achieved, the cost of coming out would be reduced dramatically. And they would make gay communities safer, thus accelerating the process of community building.

Coming out and community building have had enormous staying power as core strategic impulses. Both seem to speak directly to what is perhaps the defining feature of gay experience, the fact that almost all gay men and lesbians are neither raised in nor socialized at an early age into a gay community. The imprint of those critical years of isolation, especially when compounded by the historic invisibility of homosexuality in everyday social

life and in popular culture, creates an insistent need for the alternative—for visibility and the connection that community provides. Hence, the great enthusiasm that greeted the coming out of Ellen DeGeneres's TV sitcom character in 1997, and the decision of some sectors of the movement to plan a great public rally in the nation's capital in the year 2000, despite the absence of a concrete political agenda that a rally might contribute toward advancing.

Yet even as coming out and community building remain powerful impulses, the current period of creeping along has seen a dramatic shift in the specific issues that are animating the gay community. Matters like civil rights protections and sodomy law repeal certainly remain on the agenda, but since the eruption of the debate over the military exclusion policy in 1993, the weight of gay and lesbian advocacy efforts have tilted toward a new cluster of issues: family, school, and work. The recognition of same-sex relationships either through domestic partnership arrangements or the legalization of same-sex marriage; the assertion of the right to parent, the quest for equitable adoption, foster care, and custody policies, and the need to have the law recognize that some children have two parents of the same gender; the proliferation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual employee groups across the country and their efforts to achieve workplace equity; the local battles over school curricula, the rights of students to organize gay-straight alliance clubs, the need for gay-supportive counseling and other policies in order to make schools safe places for students of all sexual identities: these, more than the old staples of the 1970s, have become the key issues in the gay community since the early 1990s.

The importance of this shift has been masked by the fact that the issues can be seen simply as new planks added to a gay political agenda. But in fact they are qualitatively different. Whereas the issues of the 1970s revolved around a demand to be left alone, those of the 1990s call for recognition and inclusion. Instead of a core outlook captured by the phrase "here we are," the agitation around family, school, and work puts forward a different demand: "we want in." If the former appears as a simple statement of fact that can be realized through visibility and the creation of public communities, the latter demands both action and response. It requires, for its realization, a strategy of winning allies, of building support outside the community from the people—heterosexuals—whose lives will inevitably be changed too by the full inclusion of homosexuals in the core institutions of American society. It also suggests the distance that the movement has

traveled from the days over a generation ago when it would have been thrilled just to receive a hearing.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I have attempted to identify temporal cycles of change in the history of the gay and lesbian movement. I have also sought to align the periods of incremental change (what I have described as creeping along) with unifying strategic impulses. Though this analysis by no means accounts for the full range of activity or the various crosscurrents that inevitably exist in any period of time, it does, I believe, provide a reasonably accurate overview of the movement's history and political evolution.

It also suggests that the current moment in which we find ourselves—that is, in a third era of creeping along—displays strategic incoherence. In previous periods, goals, methods, and strategic vision worked in tandem with one another. Today, the gay and lesbian movement still places high value on a strategic vision that emphasizes coming out and community building, but the actual goals toward which activism is directed—goals around family, school, and work encapsulated by the outlook “we want in”—will not best be served by primary emphasis on coming out and building community. Access to and equity within the key structures of American life will instead require that winning allies becomes a priority. Coming out, of course, is a necessary precondition for this, but coming out has been so absorbed into the value structure of contemporary gay life that it hardly needs to be the movement's main rallying cry. As for community building, it can in serious ways work counter to achieving success in these other areas. Community building easily becomes insular and separatist. It can unwittingly foster an isolation and marginalization that runs contrary to the imperative of political engagement, particularly of the sort that involves winning support from outside one's own community.

These comments are meant to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. That is, I am making no judgment on the suitability of the goals that seem to be animating large numbers of gay men and lesbians in recent years. But, to the degree that success in achieving these new issues matter to their advocates, they will be better served by adopting methods of organizing designed to attract supporters and build coalitions. Otherwise, when the next moment of dramatic opportunity arrives, the movement will find itself too poorly positioned for a great leap into the future.

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