Gay Politics, Gay Community
San Francisco's Experience
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For gay men and for lesbians, San Francisco has become akin to what Rome is for Catholics: a lot of us live there and many more make the pilgrimage. The gay male subculture in San Francisco is more visible and more complex than in any other city. Mainstream media from CBS to Playboy find it newsworthy enough to explore, expose, and vilify. Though most of the publicity has focused on the gay male presence, lesbians in the Bay Area also sustain more institutions than their sisters elsewhere. San Francisco is one of the very few cities where lesbians are residentially concentrated enough to be visible. For gay men and for lesbians, San Francisco is a special place.

The gay community in San Francisco and its politics have been a long time in the making. Surveying its history can tell us much not just about one city, but about the emergence of sexual minorities generally, about shifting forms of oppression and changing political strategies.

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The Historical Background

The distinction between behavior and identity is critical to an understanding of contemporary gay male and lesbian life. Jeffrey Weeks described it well in Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain. "Homosexuality has existed throughout history," he wrote. "But what have varied enormously are the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves... As a starting point we have to distinguish between homosexual behaviour, which is universal, and a homosexual identity, which is historically specific—and a comparatively recent phenomenon."

In colonial America, in the family-centered household economy of the north, heterosexual relations and individual survival meshed, as production was based on the cooperative labor of husband, wife, and their children. Where forced labor predominated, white indentured servants and black slaves were deprived of the most basic control of their own bodies. In either setting, the presence of lesbians and gay men is literally inconceivable. Though evidence of homosexual activity in the colonial era survives (mainly through the court records that detailed its punishment), nothing indicates that men or women could make their erotic/emotional attraction for the same sex into a personal identity. The prevailing ideology reflected the facts of social existence. Homosexual behavior was labeled a sin and a crime, a discrete act for which the perpetrator received punishment, in this world and the next. In pre-industrial America, heterosexuality remained undefined because it was truly the only way of life.

The decisive shift in the nineteenth century to industrial capitalism provided the conditions for a homosexual and lesbian identity to emerge. As a free-labor system, capitalism pulled men and women out of the home and into the market place. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, capital expanded its sway over more aspects of material life and began producing as commodities goods that were once made in the home. Free labor and the expansion of commodity production created the context in which an autonomous personal life
could develop. Affection, personal relationships, and sexuality increasingly entered the realm of "choice," seemingly independent and disconnected from how one organized the production of goods necessary for survival. Under these conditions, men and women could fashion an identity and a way of life out of their sexual and emotional attraction to members of the same sex. As industrial capitalism extended its hegemony, the potential for homosexual desire to coalesce into an identity grew. Not only had it become possible to be a lesbian or a homosexual: as time passed, more and more men and women could embody that potential.

Beginning in the last third of the nineteenth century, evidence points to the appearance of gay men and women. Meeting places, rudimentary institutions, and friendship networks dotted the urban landscape. The medical profession "discovered" the homosexual, a new, exotic human type. The lead taken by the medical profession in reconceptualizing homosexuality as a condition that inheres in a person, rather than as a criminal, sinful act, was less a sign of scientific progress than an ideological response to a changing social reality: some women and men were structuring their lives in a new way. During the first half of the twentieth century, the institutions and networks that constituted the subculture of gay men and lesbians slowly grew, stabilized, and differentiated themselves. This process occurred in an oppressive context. Those who engaged in homosexual activity were severely punished if they were caught; the culture devalued homosexual expression in any form; and lesbians and gay men were denied information about the lives of their own kind and about their sexuality.

Capitalist society differentiates and discriminates according to gender, class, and race. The evolution of gay life reflects those processes. For instance, in building upon its patriarchal origins, capitalism drew more men than women out of the home and into the paid labor force, and at higher wages. The potential for men to live outside the heterosexual family unit has been, consequently, proportionately greater and the difference is reflected in the contrasting incidence rates for homosexuality among men and women in the Kinsey studies. Also, given that the public space of cities is male space, it is not sur-
prising that gay male life has been significantly more public than lesbian life.

Postwar San Francisco

THE SLOW, gradual evolution of a gay identity and of urban gay subcultures was immeasurably hastened by the intervention of World War II. The social disruption of the war years allowed the almost imperceptible changes of several generations to coalesce into a qualitatively new shape. World war II was something of a nationwide coming-out experience. It properly marks the beginning of the nation's, and San Francisco's, modern gay history.

The war uprooted tens of millions of American men and women, plucking them from families, small towns, and the ethnic neighborhoods of large cities and depositing them in a variety of sex-segregated, non-familial environments. Most obvious among these were the armed services, but the home front also departed from the co-sexual, heterosexual norm of peacetime society with millions of women entering the labor force, often working and lodging in all-female space. Young men and women who, in normal times, might have moved directly from their parents' home into one with their spouse, experienced years of living away from kin, and away from the intimate company of the opposite sex. For a generation of Americans, World War II created a setting in which to experience same-sex love, affection, and sexuality, and to discover and participate in the group life of gay men and women. For some it simply confirmed a way of living and loving they had already chosen. For others, it gave meaning to little-understood desires, introduced them to men and women with similar feelings, and thus allowed them to "come out." For still others, the sexual underside of the war years provided them with experiences they otherwise would not have had and that they left behind when the war ended.

If the war years allowed large numbers of lesbians and gay men to discover their sexuality and each other, repression in the postwar decade heightened consciousness of belonging to a group. One component of cold-war politics was the drive to
reconstruct traditional gender roles and patterns of sexual behavior. Women experienced intense pressure to leave the labor force and return home to the role of wife and mother. Homosexuals and lesbians found themselves under virulent attack: purges from the armed forces; Congressional investigation into government employment of "perverts"; disbarment from federal jobs; widespread FBI surveillance; state sexual psychopath laws; stepped-up harassment from urban police forces, and the inflammatory headlines of the metropolitan press warning residents of the danger of sex "deviates" in their midst. The tightening web of oppression in McCarthy's America helped to create the minority it was meant to isolate.

The war and its aftermath also decisively shaped the gay history of San Francisco, initiating a process that has made the city a unique place for lesbians and gay men. As a major port of departure and return for servicemen and women destined for the Pacific theater (and, later, for the postwar occupation of Japan and the fighting in Korea), and as an important center of war industry, the Bay Area's charm and physical beauty were exposed to large numbers of young, mobile Americans. Many stayed after demobilization; others later returned. Between 1940 and 1950 the population of San Francisco, which had declined during the 1930s, grew by over 125,000.

The growth included a disproportionate number of lesbians and gay men, many of whom had reasons for settling in San Francisco specific to their sexual identities. The sporadic, unpredictable purges from the armed forces in the Pacific had the effect of depositing lesbians and homosexuals, sometimes hundreds at a time, in San Francisco with dishonorable discharges. Unable or unwilling to return home in disgrace to family and friends, they stayed to carve out a new gay life. California, moreover, was the one state whose courts upheld the right of homosexuals to congregate in bars and other public establishments. Though the police found ways around the decision and continued to harass gay bars, the ruling gave to bars in San Francisco a tiny measure of security lacking elsewhere. By the late 1950s about thirty gay male and lesbian bars existed in the city, perhaps more than in New York. Such small advantages were significant, and over the years the individual decisions to
settle in San Francisco created a qualitative difference in the shape of gay life. Census statistics hint at the degree to which San Francisco, even before the 1970s, was attracting a gay populace. From 1950 to 1960 the number of single-person households doubled and accounted for 38 per cent of the city's residence units.

Under the combined impact of the war, the publication in 1948 of the Kinsey study of male sexual behavior, the persecutions of the McCarthy era, and the wide currency that a growing civil rights movement was giving to the concept of minority group status, some gay men and lesbians took the first steps toward building a political movement of their own. In 1950, a small group of male homosexuals who were members of the Communist Party or fellow-travelers formed the Mattachine Society in Los Angeles. Initially a secret underground organization, it developed a radical analysis of homosexuals as an oppressed cultural minority and sought to build a mass, militant movement of homosexuals working for their own emancipation. Though the founders were eventually purged and the philosophy and goals of the group transformed, the Mattachine did, at least, survive. In 1953 a branch was formed in San Francisco. Three years later, the organization's national office moved there and its monthly magazine, Mattachine Review, was published out of San Francisco. In 1955 several lesbians founded the Daughters of Bilitis in San Francisco, a lesbian political group. DOB also published a monthly magazine, The Ladder, and tried, with limited success, to set up chapters in other cities.

Throughout the 1950s, the "homophile" movement remained small and fragile. The combined membership of DOB and Mattachine in San Francisco probably never exceeded two hundred (yet no other American city reached even that number during the decade). Hostile as the social climate of the 1950s was to a gay movement, and notwithstanding the personal courage that involvement in a lesbian or gay male organization required, the feeble size of the movement stemmed in no small part from the political choices made by homophile leaders. Mattachine and DOB reflected the accommodationist, conformist spirit of the Eisenhower era. They assiduously culti-
vated an image of middle-class respectability and denied that they were organizations of homosexuals, instead claiming that they were concerned with the problem of the “variant.” They expected social change to come through the good offices of professionals—doctors, lawyers, ministers, and psychologists. They saw their task primarily as one of educating the professionals who influenced public opinion and only secondarily as one of organizing lesbians and gay men. In defining prejudice and misinformation on the problem, both DOB and Mattachine often found themselves blaming the victim. DOB regularly counseled lesbians to grow their hair long and wear dresses, and Mattachine firmly dissociated itself from the stereotypical promiscuous sexuality of male homosexuals, in one instance even applauding the local police for rounding up gay men who frequented the restroom of a railroad terminal. Neither organization had kind words for the milieu of the gay bars, though they would have done well to consider why the bars were packed while their membership rolls remained tiny.

Despite these limitations, one cannot dismiss the work of DOB and Mattachine in making San Francisco what it is today. More copies of The Ladder and Mattachine Review were distributed in San Francisco than elsewhere. The city had more women and men doing gay “political” work than any other. They made contact with a significant number of professionals, and initiated a dialogue that was a crucial step in changing anti-gay attitudes. As the national headquarters of both organizations, San Francisco attracted gay men and lesbians.

Though a militant, grass-roots nationwide liberation movement of lesbians and gay men did not emerge until the end of the 1960s, San Francisco alone witnessed the beginnings of militancy and a mass politics several years earlier (at least among gay men). San Francisco was the first city to see the barrier between the “movement” and the gay subculture break down. The imperus for this pre-Stonewall wave of gay politics did not come from leadership exerted by already existing homophile organizations. Instead, it emerged out of the subculture of bars, and resulted from a set of circumstances unique to San Francisco: the “Beat” scene in North Beach; two well-publicized, politically embarrassing homosexual-related scan-
dals; and a three-year-long, intensive police crackdown against homosexuals.

San Francisco in the 1940s and 1950s was the setting for an underground literary movement of poets and writers who saw themselves as cultural dissenters from the dominant ethos of cold-war America, trying to express through verse their opposition to the bland conformity and consumerism of the postwar era. By the mid-1950s, the bohemian literary scene in North Beach began attracting beat writers like Allen Ginsberg. Word of what was happening spread and the San Francisco poets slowly reached a wider audience.

After 1957, however, what began as a small, underground literary movement was suddenly transmuted by the media into a nationwide generational rebellion against everything that America held sacred. The summer witnessed the trial of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of City Lights bookstore, on charges of selling obscene literature, Ginsberg’s Howl. Simultaneously, Kerouac’s On the Road was published. Over the next two years the media turned a spotlight on the beat rebellion and on North Beach, the setting of the most visible, concentrated beat subculture. Whatever the beats were really about soon was overshadowed by the sensationalistic portrayal of them in the press and in magazines. As writers and as a social movement, they received almost universal condemnation. Look accused the beats of turning “the average American’s value scale... inside out.” The local press descended on North Beach, with the Examiner and the Chronicle running lurid series that exposed the boozing, drug-crazed, orgiastic, and sexually perverse daily life of San Francisco’s beatniks. In a way that tended to become self-fulfilling, North Beach was labeled the “international headquarters” of the beat generation.

The visibility of the beat subculture in North Beach had a major impact upon gay consciousness in San Francisco. Despite the hostile intent behind the media’s portrayal of the beat scene as rife with “sexual perversion,” the characterization had important elements of truth. Many of the central figures of the literary renaissance in San Francisco were gay men—Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and, of course, Ginsberg—
and through their work they carved out a male homosexual cultural space. Ginsberg's *Howl*, which became a local best-seller after the obscenity trial, accomplished an open acknowledgment of homosexuality. In describing gay male sexuality as joyous, delightful, and even holy, Ginsberg did in fact turn American values "inside out." The geography of the two subcultures, moreover, overlapped considerably, with the beats centered in North Beach, and many of the city's gay male and lesbian bars stretching from North Beach over to the Tenderloin and to the Polk Street area.

Most importantly, to the extent that there was a coherent philosophy behind the beat protest, it resonated with the experience of gays in the 1950s. The beats were rebelling against the "straight" ethos of cold-war society—career, home and family, suburban bliss—an ethos that excluded lesbians and gay men. They gloried in their "deviant" lifestyles. When Paul Goodman, whose *Growing Up Absurd* was one of the few serious critical treatments of the beats, described the "structural characteristics" of beat society, he could just as easily have been referring to gay and lesbian life: outcastness; facing prejudice; protective exclusiveness; in-group loyalty; fear of the cops; exotic, or at least not-standard-American, art and folkways. The beats provided a different lens through which homosexuals and lesbians could view their lives—as a form of protest against a stultifying lifestyle and set of values.

While the beats exerted their subtle influence upon the self-image of the city's gay population, two homosexual-related scandals rocked the city. In the midst of the 1959 mayoral campaign, one of the candidates, Russell Wolden, accused incumbent mayor George Christopher and his chief of police Thomas Cahill of allowing San Francisco to become "the national headquarters of the organized homosexuals in the United States." Wolden's charges, based on the fact that Mattachine and DOB were located in San Francisco, made front-page headlines for several days. Political figures and the local press vigorously denied the charges but the affair made the entire city aware of the homophile organizations in its midst.
The following spring, the city was treated to another extensive discussion of the gay presence in San Francisco when a “gayola” scandal hit the police department. Several gay bar owners, fed up with making monthly payoffs to the police, reported to the district attorney a long history of extortion. One detective and a state liquor department investigator were caught with marked money and pleaded guilty. Several other indicted members of the SFPD opted for a jury trial that dragged on throughout the summer. All of them were, naturally, acquitted, but the scandal seriously embarrassed the police department and the Christopher administration.

Taken together, the beat phenomenon and the homosexual scandals were giving San Francisco an unwelcome reputation as the home for the nation’s “deviates” and “rebels.” By 1959, the police had increased their patrols in North Beach and were systematically harassing beat gathering places and individuals. The following year, immediately after the conclusion of the gayola trials, the police, with the support and encouragement of the mayor, shifted their attention to the city’s gay population and began an extended, brutal crackdown against almost every public manifestation of homosexuality. Felony convictions of gay men, which stood at zero in the first half of 1960, rose to 29 in the next six months and jumped to 76 in the first six months of 1961. Misdemeanor charges against gay women and men stemming from sweeps of the bars ran at an estimated forty to sixty per week during 1961. In August 1961 the police conducted the biggest gay bar raid in the city’s history, arresting 89 men and 14 women at the Tay-Bush Inn. By October the state alcoholic beverage control department had revoked the licenses of twelve of the city’s thirty gay bars and had initiated proceedings against another fifteen. Every one of the bars that testified against the police department during the gayola inquiry was shut down. The police, backed by the city’s press, intensified surveillance of gay male cruising areas such as Buena Vista Park and Union Square. Vice squad officers raided theaters showing male homosexual porn films and confiscated thousands of volumes of gay male and lesbian pulp fiction.

Police harassment of gay bars was not new. In the 1950s, it was endemic to the gay male and lesbian subculture of Ameri-
can cities. What was novel about the San Francisco police crackdown was the social context in which it took place. The scandals of 1959 and 1960 led to an unprecedented degree of public discussion of homosexuality. As one veteran local reporter put it, "San Francisco parents were uncomfortably alone among the fathers and mothers of America in having to field such questions from 11 and 12 year olds as 'Daddy, what is a homosexual?'" Just as important, the stepped-up harassment followed upon the growing awareness of the beat rebellion and its subtle impact on gay consciousness in San Francisco. Thus, the conditions were present to encourage a political response to the antigay campaign.

The response did not come from the existing homophile organizations. Both DOB and Mattachine were too enmeshed in the accommodationist politics of the 1950s and too caught in the quest for respectability to spark a resistance to attacks on aspects of gay life that both organizations deplored as unseemly. Instead, the first wave of rebellion emerged directly out of the bar subculture and out of the one bar, the Black Cat, where gay men, bohemian nonconformity, and police harassment most clearly converged.

Located on Montgomery Street a few blocks from the center of North Beach, the Black Cat had a long history as a bohemian meeting place. In the 1940s the character of the bar began to change and it became more clearly a gay male bar. But it retained a special flavor. Allen Ginsberg described it as "the greatest gay bar in America...totally open, bohemian.... All the gay screaming queens would come, the heterosexual gray flannel suit types, longshoremen. All the poets went there." For over fifteen years, beginning in the late 1940s, its owner Sol Stoumen steadfastly engaged in a court fight against the state liquor board to stay open, spending over $38,000 to finance his protracted court battle.

During the 1950s, the Black Cat had a drag entertainer, José Sarria, who staged satirical operas on Sunday afternoons that drew an overflow crowd of two to three hundred. Sarria took a traditional, sometimes oppressive and self-deprecating, form of gay male humor—camp and drag—and transformed it into political theater. Outrageously dressed in female attire, he
would perform Carmen, except that Carmen was a homosexual hiding in the bushes of Union Square trying to avoid capture by the vice squad. For years, Sarria ended his show without satire. As George Mendenhall, a pre-Stonewall activist, recalled it, "José would make these political comments about our rights as homosexuals and at the end ... of every concert, he would have everybody in the room stand, and we would put our arms around each other and sing, 'God Save Us Nelly Queens.' It sounds silly, but if you lived at that time and had the oppression coming down from the police department and from society, there was nowhere ... to be able to put your arms around other gay men and sing 'God Save Us Nelly Queens.' ... We were not really saying 'God Save Us Nelly Queens.' We were saying 'We have our rights.'"

In 1961, at the height of the police crackdown, Sarria took his political message out of the bars. He decided to run for city supervisor. Sarria had no chance of winning, but victory wasn't his goal. "I was trying to prove to my gay audience," he recalled, "that I had the right, being as notorious and gay as I was, to run for public office, because people in those days didn't believe you had rights." Sarria's operas made him the best-known gay man in San Francisco; his reputation extended to the entire bargoing population. Though he collected only six thousand votes, his candidacy was the hot topic in the bars that fall, forcing patrons to think about their lives and their sexual orientation in political terms.

Sarria's candidacy set in motion developments that fed a steadily growing stream of lesbian and gay political activity in San Francisco throughout the 1960s. During his campaign, a group of gay men began publishing a biweekly newspaper that they distributed in the bars. Financed by advertising from gay tavern owners, the League for Civil Education News used a muckraking style to expose gay oppression. Headlines such as "SFPD ATTACKS HOMOS" and "WE MUST FIGHT NOW!" fueled an ongoing discussion of police abuses among bar patrons. LCE News encouraged gays to vote as a bloc and sponsored registration drives. By 1963 candidates for public office were taking ads in the paper. In 1962 several gay bar owners formed the Tavern Guild as a defense organization to resist attacks from the state. In 1964 some members of the Tavern Guild and a few
other friends founded the Society for Individual Rights. SIR was virtually alone among pre-Stonewall gay male homophile organizations in legitimating the social needs of homosexuals. In addition to voter registration, candidates’ nights during election time, public picketing, and other “political” activity, SIR sponsored dances, bridge clubs, and picnics, provided VD testing, and opened a community center. Its meetings often attracted more than two hundred people, and by 1968 it had a membership of almost a thousand, making it far and away the largest male homophile organization in the country.

By the mid-1960s, lesbians and gay men in San Francisco were breaking out of the isolation that oppression imposed upon them. In 1964, Glide Memorial Methodist Church, whose social-action ministry in the Tenderloin forced it to confront the situation of young male hustlers, opened a dialogue with the city’s homophile organizations. Lesbian and gay activists and ministers of several denominations formed the Council on Religion and the Homosexual. The ministers received a vivid display of gay oppression when they sponsored a New Year’s Eve Dance for San Francisco’s gay community. The SFPD was there to photograph people as they entered California Hall and to arrest several “chaperones” for “obstructing” police officers. The police came under heavy attack from the press, the ACLU took the case, and a municipal judge dismissed all charges and reprimanded the police. Thereafter, a segment of the city’s Protestant clergy spoke out for gay rights and initiated discussions of homosexuality within their denominations. Phyllis Lyon of DOB was hired to run CRH’s educational program. In 1965, Del Martin of DOB helped organize Citizens Alert, a twenty-four-hour hotline to respond to incidents of police brutality. In 1966, Mattachine and SIR, with the assistance of Glide, won OEO funding for the Tenderloin area to work with male hustlers. Two openly gay men were hired for the project. That summer, DOB planned ten days of public forums at which city officials addressed themselves to gay concerns. Homophile groups cooperatively sponsored candidates’ nights each year and local politicians began to court the gay vote. Some, like state legislator Willie Brown, enthusiastically took up gay concerns.
Unlike the Stonewall Riot of 1969, the impact of Sarria’s symbolic candidacy remained confined to San Francisco. The city’s situation was too unique, gay men and lesbians in the rest of the country still too isolated and invisible, for it to have anything more than a local effect. At the end of the 1960s, news of a gay riot in New York could spread rapidly through the networks of communication created by the mass movements of the decade. In 1961, with the exception of the Southern civil rights movement, those movements and those channels for disseminating information did not exist. And the absence of a nationwide gay movement placed limits in turn on how far gay politics in San Francisco could develop.

However, there were additional reasons why, on a local level, the discontent within the bars was channeled into reform politics. SIR and the Tavern Guild maintained a close working relationship (the two had an overlapping leadership) and SIR relied on the Guild for much of its funds and for publicity. Bar owners wanted police harassment of their businesses to end; once that goal had been achieved, as it largely had by about 1966, their interest in politics waned and their needs increasingly diverged from patrons who faced job discrimination and police harassment in other urban spaces. The dependence on gay entrepreneurs encouraged SIR’s leaders not to rock the boat. Those gay men for whom the beats’ cultural protest and glorification of nonconformity had originally struck a responsive chord found little in SIR to claim their allegiance. Instead, the heirs of the beats—the burgeoning hippie movement and counterculture in the Bay Area—offered them a more hospitable home. By the late 1960s gay politics in San Francisco had lost its dynamism.

Homophile politics in San Francisco remained within the limits of reformism during the 1960s and actively involved only a small fraction of the city’s lesbian and gay male population. At most, two thousand men and women had organizational affiliation and of these only a few dozen could be considered “hardcore” activists. Yet the movement had achieved a level of visibility unmatched in other cities, so that by the late 1960s mass magazines were referring to San Francisco as the gay capital of the United States. When the Stonewall Riot catalyzed a gay liberation movement, the basis existed for San
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Francisco's lesbian and gay male community to assume a leading role.

The Growth of the Gay Liberation Movement

The Stonewall Riot in New York in June 1969 was able to inspire a nationwide grass-roots liberation movement of gay men and lesbians because of the mass radical movements that preceded it. Black militants provided a model of an oppressed minority that rejected assimilation and aggressively transformed their "stigma" into a source of pride and strength. The new left, antiwar, and student movements popularized a critique of American society and a confrontational style of political action. The counterculture encouraged the rejection of the values and lifestyle of the middle class, especially in its sexual mores. Above all, the women's liberation movement had provided a political analysis of sex roles and sexism.

Stonewall initiated a qualitatively different phase of gay and lesbian politics. Two aspects deserve emphasis. One is the notion of "coming out" which served both as a goal and a strategy. Coming out became a profoundly political act that an individual could take. It promised an immediate improvement in one's life, a huge step forward in shedding the self-hatred and internalized oppression imposed by a homophobic society. Coming out also became the key strategy for building a mass movement. When gay women and men came out, we crossed a critical dividing line. We relinquished our invisibility, made ourselves vulnerable to attack, and became personally invested in the success of the movement in a way that mere adherence to a political line could never accomplish. Visible lesbians and gay men, moreover, served as magnets that drew others to us.

Coming out quickly captured the imagination of tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of lesbians and gay men. A mass movement was born almost overnight. On the eve of Stonewall, after almost twenty years of homophile politics, fewer than fifty organizations existed. By 1973, there were more than eight hundred lesbian and gay male groups scattered across the country. The largest pre-Stonewall homophile demonstrations attracted only a few dozen people. In June 1970
five thousand women and men marched in New York to commemorate the Stonewall Rebellion. By the mid-1970s, the yearly marches in several cities were larger than any other political demonstrations since the decline of the civil rights and antiwar movements. Lesbians and gay men created publications and independent presses, record companies, coffeehouses, community centers, counseling services, health clinics, and professional associations.

A second critical feature of the post-Stonewall era was the emergence of a lesbian movement. Lesbians were but a small fraction of the tiny homophile movement. The almost simultaneous birth of women's liberation and gay liberation propelled large numbers of lesbians into liberation politics. Lesbians were active both in early gay liberation groups and in feminist organizations. By 1970 the experience of sexism in gay liberation groups and of heterosexism in the women's liberation movement inspired many lesbians to form organizations of their own, such as Radicalesbians in New York, the Furies Collective in Washington, D.C., and Gay Women's Liberation in San Francisco. Lesbian-feminism pushed the analysis of sexism and heterosexism beyond where either the women's or gay liberation movement ventured and so cogently related the two systems of oppression that sectors of the women's movement and gay movement had to incorporate lesbian-feminist analysis into their political practice.

Though gay liberation and women's liberation each played an important role in the emergence of a lesbian-feminist movement, in certain ways the latter exerted a special influence. The feminist movement provided the physical and psychic space for growing numbers of women to come out. As women explored their oppression together, it became easier to acknowledge their love for other women and to embrace "woman-identification." Many lesbians were already living independent, autonomous lives: unencumbered by primary sexual and emotional attachments to men, lesbians had the freedom to explore the farthest reaches of a feminist future. They also had the inclination and need to build and sustain a network of women-identified institutions and spaces—coffeehouses, clinics, shelters, record companies, presses, schools, and communes—that con-
tinually nourished the growth of a lesbian-feminist politics. As opponents of feminism were quick to realize, the women’s movement was, in fact, a “breeding ground” for lesbians.

Only a minority of lesbians and gay men had organizational involvement in our liberation movements, but that minority decisively affected the lives of a much larger number. Through coming out, through the example of gay pride, through the vastly increased flow of information about lesbianism and gayness that an activist minority stimulated, and especially through the inhibitions on police harassment that our militancy imposed, lesbian and gay liberation transformed the self-image of even “apolitical” gays, and offered the hope of a better life to many who never attended a meeting or participated in a demonstration.

IN CONCRETE TERMS a better life often translated into a decision to move to one of the handful of large cities known to have a well-developed gay subculture. America in the 1970s saw what Gayle Rubin has called a massive “sexual migration” set in motion by the lesbian and gay movements. Here, San Francisco had a running start on every other city. Homophile groups were already getting attention from liberal politicians and had already limited police harassment of bars. Magazines played up San Francisco’s reputation as a city that tolerated gays. The 1960s, moreover, established the Bay Area as an enclave of radical and lifestyle politics—from the Berkeley Free Speech Movement through draft resistance, the strike led by third-world students at San Francisco State College, and People’s Park. The women’s movement in the Bay Area, though not free of gay-straight conflict, was noticeably more hospitable to lesbians than elsewhere. While New York NOW, for instance, was purging lesbians from its ranks, San Francisco NOW was pushing for a lesbian rights resolution at the organization’s 1971 national convention.

By the mid-1970s San Francisco had become, in comparison to the rest of the country, a liberated zone for lesbians and gay men. It had the largest number and widest variety of organizations and institutions. An enormous in-migration had created a new social phenomenon, residential areas that were visibly gay
in composition: Duboce Triangle, Noe Valley, and the Upper Mission for lesbians; the Haight, Folsom, and above all the Castro for gay men. Geographic concentration offered the opportunity for local political power that invisibility precluded.

The explosive growth of the gay community and its political activism also made internal differences visible. For some gay men liberation meant freedom from harassment; for radical lesbians it meant overthrowing the patriarchy. Bay Area Gay Liberation participated in anti-imperialist coalitions while members of the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club sought to climb within the Democratic party hierarchy. The interests of gay entrepreneurs in the Castro clashed with those of their gay employees. Gay male real-estate speculators displayed little concern for "brothers" who could not pay the skyrocketing rents. Gay men and women of color found themselves displaced by more privileged members of the community as gentrification spread to more and more neighborhoods. Sexual orientation created a kind of unity, but other aspects of identity brought to the surface conflicting needs and interests.

Gay Politics in the Late Seventies

THE SECOND HALF of the 1970s witnessed a rapid coming of age of gays as a political force in San Francisco. In 1975 George Moscone, a liberal state senator, was elected mayor by a narrow margin of three thousand votes. In contrast to his predecessor and his opponent, Moscone had a pro-gay legislative record, having played a key role in securing passage of California's consenting adult law. Moscone credited gays with providing his margin of victory and included gays among the constituencies to be courted with political appointments. He picked Harvey Milk for the Board of Permit Appeals, lesbian activists Jo Daly and Phyllis Lyon for the human rights commission, and Del Martin for the commission on the status of women, a tokenism that should not obscure how novel such tokens were. In November 1976 gay residential areas voted heavily for Proposition T, which mandated district elections for city supervisors. The following year Milk, a political outsider with few ties to the gay Democratic "establishment," won
election from District 5, which included the Castro, Noe Valley, and the Haight. In June 1976 San Francisco surpassed New York in the size of its Gay Freedom Day march. The turnout of over ninety thousand alerted politicians to the potential significance of the gay vote.

The antigay backlash of the new right provided the stimulus that, for a time, appeared to transform that potential into a force with real power. The Dade County repeal campaign in 1977 pointed to San Francisco as a concrete example of where gay rights would lead. Anita Bryant called San Francisco “a cesspool of sexual perversion gone rampant.” “Don’t let Miami become another San Francisco” was the theme of the antigay forces. The night of the Miami vote more than five thousand women and men marched through the city to Union Square where a lesbian shimmied up a flagpole to raise a red “Gay Revolution” banner. The anger of the crowd stunned “gay leaders” who had planned a silent, candlelight vigil on Castro Street. Two weeks later Robert Hillsborough was murdered by four youths who shouted “faggot, faggot” as they stabbed him fifteen times. Moscone ordered the flags at city hall lowered to half mast and offered a reward for the killers’ capture. A few days later, a staggering crowd of two hundred thousand women and men marched in San Francisco to mark the eighth anniversary of the Stonewall Riot. Over the next year, after each of the gay rights repeal votes—in St. Paul, Wichita, and Eugene—the city’s lesbians and gay men took to the streets. Their slogans revealed the depth of their anger: “civil rights or civil war.”

California’s lesbians and gay men, meanwhile, were faced with an antigay measure of their own, one that went beyond the repeal of civil rights guarantees. The day after the Miami vote, John Briggs, an ultraconservative state senator from Orange County with aspirations for higher office, announced plans to introduce legislation to prohibit gays from teaching in the public schools. When it became obvious that the legislation had no chance of passage, Briggs shifted tactics and mounted a campaign to have his proposal placed on the ballot as a statewide initiative. By early 1978 it was clear that California voters would have to decide in November whether lesbians and gay
men, as well as anyone who publicly or privately advocated or encouraged homosexual conduct, should be dismissed from jobs in the public school system.

The Briggs initiative stimulated the most far-reaching and sustained gay organizing campaign in history. A bewildering array of organizations came into existence in every part of the state, with a wide range of political perspectives. Unlike the previous campaigns in other cities—low-key, respectable, "human rights" in emphasis—a major sector of the anti-Briggs effort decided to confront issues of homophobia and sexuality directly, to link the antigay initiative with Proposition 7, a measure to reinstitute the death penalty, and to discuss the Briggs initiative as one part of a new-right strategy to attack racial minorities, women, and workers. The San Francisco lesbian and gay communities were in the forefront of the more radical approach to the anti-Briggs campaign and throughout the summer and fall they sustained an extraordinary level of political activity, not only in San Francisco but throughout Northern California.

The mobilization of San Francisco's lesbians and gay men against Briggs secured other important gains and provided further evidence of growing gay power. The Prop 6 campaign forced most of the city's politicians to take a pro-gay stand, however tenuous and opportunist. In March 1978, after years of effort, a comprehensive gay rights ordinance was passed by the Board of Supervisors. The board also voted a certificate of honor to Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon for their contribution to civic improvement (i.e., lesbian activism), and for twenty-five years of living together. The city allocated public funds for Gay Freedom Day activities; three hundred thousand people assembled for the rally at civic center. San Francisco's police chief, Charles Gain, announced a drive to recruit lesbians and gay men for the police force and urged gays already in the department to come out.

The anti-Briggs campaign also had a profound effect on the political career and image of Harvey Milk, San Francisco's gay supervisor. Milk was not the "leader" of the No on 6 effort, which was too diverse and decentralized to have a primary spokesperson. But as the state's only openly gay elected official
and as a representative from the heavily gay District 5, Milk was uniquely visible. He debated Briggs throughout the state and received enormous media exposure; for many, Milk came to symbolize gay liberation.

The anti-Briggs campaign also gave Milk a degree of political leverage that most local politicians only dream of attaining. Beyond his statewide publicity, he was the elected representative of the largest, most mobilized constituency in San Francisco. Milk's record during his one year in office indicates that he matured as a political leader, became more than a gay spokesperson, and was moving beyond liberalism. He worked hard to cement a coalition among gays, racial minorities, and the elderly. He became a strong advocate of rent control and measures to restrict real-estate speculation, he opposed the redevelopment plans being pushed by downtown corporate interests, and he introduced a resolution to have the South African consulate in San Francisco closed. During 1978 he helped to push Moscone away from mainstream liberalism and toward a populist-style coalition politics. By the time of the November election, Milk had become one of the most popular politicians in San Francisco and had achieved wide voter recognition throughout the state.

The November balloting brought a decisive victory to California's lesbians and gay man. Although early polls indicated extensive support for the Briggs initiative, by late September there was a noticeable shift in public opinion. Almost sixty per cent of the electorate voted no on Prop 6. In San Francisco the figure was seventy-five per cent, with only a handful of the city's nine hundred precincts supporting the measure. The California victory was enormously significant in checking the mood of gloom and despair that was infecting the lesbian and gay movement throughout the country. Locally, it stimulated celebrations and fueled a sense of growing, almost unstoppable, power. Then, less than three weeks later, Milk and Moscone were assassinated by former city supervisor Dan White.

The day after the murders, the Chronicle called them "politically motivated." The truth of that charge was appar-
ent. White, a veteran, former cop and firefighter, was the most conservative member of the Board of Supervisors and notoriously antigay. His 1977 campaign included rhetorical attacks on "social deviates." He was the only supervisor to vote against the gay rights ordinance. He tried to block street closings for the Gay Day rally in 1978. He supported the Briggs initiative. White and Milk stood at opposite ends of the political spectrum represented on the Board of Supervisors. The assassination of Milk and Moscone effected a political coup in San Francisco. There were no progressive Democrats of comparable stature to replace them. Dianne Feinstein, closely allied to downtown business interests and a mentor of Dan White, became mayor.

The assassination made clear that gay power in San Francisco was fragile. The political momentum generated among lesbians and gay men in San Francisco by the antigay backlash, and the gains made in the city during 1977–1978, had tended to obscure the extent of homophobia in San Francisco. When Sheriff Hongisto campaigned for gays in Miami, for instance, the deputy sheriffs’ association sent a telegram of support to Anita Bryant. Police chief Charles Gain’s drive to recruit lesbian and gay cops aroused the ire of the rank and file. A few days after the massive 1977 Gay Freedom Day march, five gay businesses on Castro Street were bombed. While the Board of Supervisors debated the gay rights ordinance, arsonists were setting fires in gay-owned stores in the south-of-Market Folsom area. Feinstein coupled her vote for the gay rights bill with a warning to the gay community to “set some standards.” She introduced legislation, for the fifth time, to regulate adult bookstores and theaters, many of which catered to gay men. Throughout 1977 and 1978, street violence against lesbians and gay men was a pervasive problem. There was sporadic police harassment of gay male backroom bars.

After the assassination, the balance of forces in San Francisco shifted abruptly in a way that undermined the strength of the lesbian and gay community. A few days after becoming mayor, Feinstein warned the gay community that we were a minority in a heterosexual society and had to respect the sensibilities and standards of the majority. She coupled her
exhortations with shrewd political maneuvering by waiting six weeks to appoint Milk's successor. Feinstein's gay supporters, the people she turned to for advice, were political enemies of Milk. Gay Democrats like Jim Foster, Rick Stokes, and Jo Daly were party loyalists whose vision of gay liberation was constricted by the desire to rise in the party hierarchy (Foster and Daly were Carter delegates in 1976). Unlike Milk, they had little desire to build a gay politics independent of the party machinery. Feinstein could hardly choose an enemy of Milk for his supervisory post, but she could use her appointment power to try to upset the fragile political coalition that Milk had labored to build. The six-week delay allowed plenty of time for personal ambition and factional rivalry to surface. Milk's supporters, and the lesbian community more generally, rallied around Anne Kronenberg, Milk's campaign manager and closest aide. Instead, Feinstein appointed Harry Britt, another Milk aide and initially a backer of Kronenberg. His unilateral acceptance of the post antagonized many and weakened the trust between lesbians and gay male activists that the Briggs campaign had slowly built. Britt also initially lacked the stature and community base that Milk possessed, although since taking office he has built a strong following in the community, emerged as an important spokesperson on progressive issues, and won re-election twice.

Feinstein's crude political maneuvering was soon overshadowed by the harassment and violence directed at the lesbian and gay community. In December 1978, Feinstein's antiporn bill became law and the district attorney's office began an investigation and crackdown against gay male bookstores and theaters. The city's press ran lurid stories about these dens of iniquity with quotes from vice squad members describing gay male sex as "disgusting" and "degenerate." In January, police officers assaulted and arrested two women as they left Amelia's, a lesbian bar in the Upper Mission. In March, a group of drunk off-duty cops burst into Peg's Place, a lesbian bar in the Richmond, and indiscriminately attacked patrons. The police began harassing gay male leather bars in the Folsom area and hassling young gays on Polk Street whom some "respectable" gay leaders chose to label "street punks" rather than acknowledge as runaway gay youth. The plan of these attacks was clear: leave
the Castro, the heavily gay male area, alone, but attack the "periphery" of the gay subculture: lesbian rather than gay male bars, gay youth rather than adults, sado-masochists rather than ordinary gays, porn stores and theaters rather than "good gay" meeting places.

Police harassment was accompanied by the spread of street violence. Incidents were occurring virtually every night, on the edges of gay areas in the city, but the police were slow to respond and the press generally gave no coverage to them. Occasionally an attack was too flagrant to ignore: a lesbian and gay man who were terrorized by youths in their apartment; a gay man brutally beaten by teenagers on a bus while the driver and other passengers sat quietly. But mostly knowledge of the attacks spread by word of mouth, along with a growing, gnawing fear.

Then came the Dan White murder trial: an all-white, all-straight jury; a prosecutor who never mentioned the political antagonisms between White and Milk and therefore could not prove premeditation; a taped confession, taken by White's former softball coach, that made jurors weep in sympathy for the defendant; and prosecution witnesses, like Mayor Feinstein, who praised the moral character of the killer. Throughout the trial the local press was unusually sympathetic toward the assassin of the city's mayor and gay supervisor. Cops were reported to be wearing "Free Dan White" tee-shirts; a local reporter told me that when the manslaughter verdict (the lightest possible conviction) was announced, "Oh Danny Boy" was played on the police radio.

The manslaughter verdict of May 21, 1979, sparked a riot, but did not cause the riot. The actions of the five to ten thousand gay men and women at city hall that night were caused by six months of accumulating anger over police harassment and violence, street attacks, and an increasingly hostile city administration. The riot was the response of a community that had worked hard for its victories and then, after its greatest triumph, watched its dreams shattered by bullets from an assassin who represented everything that lesbians and gay men were fighting against.
Gay men and women at city hall attacked property; later that night, after the rioting was over, the police smashed heads. Rank-and-file police, packed into squad cars and vans, and encouraged by their officers, arrived on Castro Street and produced a terrifying display of indiscriminate violence. They charged into the Elephant Walk, a popular bar, smashing windows and upsetting tables. Screaming "dirty cocksuckers" and "sick faggots," and "we lost the battle of city hall; we won't lose this one," they attacked the bar's patrons. Others went marauding through the street, bloodying the faces of passersby. For two hours Castro Street was a virtual war zone with the police on the offensive.

After the City Hall Riot

The city hall riot did not lead to a massive upsurge of national gay political activity in the way that the Stonewall riot had ten years earlier. Nevertheless, it does serve as a signpost of sorts for the changes that occurred in the 1970s, in San Francisco and elsewhere, and for what the future holds.

First of all, the city hall riot reveals a maturing and deepening of political consciousness. Stonewall was a spontaneous response by bar patrons to an immediate attack upon themselves by the police; the riot took place on gay turf. The rioters in San Francisco were reacting to a trial; they made the connection between the injustice they experience in their own lives and the workings of the judicial system, and then attacked the symbols of that system, not their own community institutions. That represents a major change from the time, not too long ago, when few gays perceived themselves as members of a group that was systematically oppressed. The largest group of demonstrators, moreover, were "clones," handsome, masculine-looking gay men who literally poured out of the bars and into the streets to go to city hall. Once again, as with Sarria's campaign and the Stonewall riot, the bars proved themselves to be repositories of political consciousness and places from which gay anger erupted. Activists who tend to dismiss the bar subculture as at best apolitical and at worst reactionary would do well to take notice.
Secondly, surrounding the city hall riot was the grim reality of violence against gay men and lesbians, the legalized violence of the police and the extralegal violence of street crime. Simply to call the rising incidence a backlash can lead us to miss an important change. Violence against us is easier to commit now than in the past because lesbians and gay men are more visible than ever before. Visibility is a precondition of gay and lesbian politics, and it may be our most basic achievement in the 1970s, but it also means that every homophobe in America knows what we look like and where to find us.

The violence promises to get worse. Its intensification in San Francisco, where now gangs of youth attack gays on the street, has forced city hearings on the problem. But the violence is nationwide: lesbians beaten outside of bars in Boston and Washington, D.C.; a prominent activist in Houston killed by police; in Greenwich Village, the machine-gunning of gay bars leaving two men dead and several wounded. These examples could be multiplied; only the most horrific receive mention in the press.

The street violence directed at gay men and lesbians is just one aspect of the larger problem of sexual violence which, in turn, is the most brutal form of a new-right effort to reconstruct traditional patriarchal gender roles and sexual relations. A few days after Reagan's election, Jerry Falwell of Moral Majority announced from the steps of the New Jersey legislature a renewed campaign against abortion, homosexuality, and pornography. If we fail to link the fight against homophobia with the fight against sexism, we'll be missing the connections that the new right understands only too well.

Finally, the size of the riot points to the huge growth of San Francisco's lesbian and gay community. Growth has also meant differentiation, diversity, and divisions. Gay communities around the country are coming to mirror the society at large with all of the conflicting interests that stem from differences of gender, race, and class.

One important development since the city hall riots has been the upsurge in organizing among third-world gay men and lesbians—black, Hispanic, and Asian—who can serve as a bridge between oppressed communities. There has also been a
noticeable move toward consciousness-raising around racism among some parts of the white lesbian and gay male community. This is especially significant because of the salience of the gentrification issue in San Francisco and many other cities. Third-world as well as white working-class communities are being displaced by white, middle-class urban “pioneers,” some of whom are gay. Housing needs, street crime, and city services could be a point of unity between a large segment of the white gay population and third-world city-dwellers rather than a source of conflict. The central city is an attractive, even necessary, place for gays to live, but many white gay men can no more afford the skyrocketing rents than can most third-world people and lesbians. The enemy is the same: corporations, banks, and real-estate developers who help provoke and cash in on the changing urban geography.

Coming out could be the linchpin of our strategy, as it was for most of the 1970s, when oppression seemed total and undifferentiated. Being gay was a lot to have in common. But one result of the gains achieved through coming out is that sexual orientation is not a sufficient basis of unity for our politics, for moving us toward liberation. A politics of visibility is necessary but not sufficient. We now need a strategy that goes beyond coming out.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The history of gay men and lesbians, and of the changing forms of homossexual oppression, remains largely unwritten. Much of the information in this article comes from my own research on the history of the pre-Stonewall gay movement, but the following sources are useful for anyone wanting to explore the issues raised in this article. Jeffrey Weeks, Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present (London: Quartet Books, 1977), discusses the emergence of a gay and lesbian identity. Jonathan Katz, Gay American History (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), is an invaluable collection of documents. Katz is completing another book, due in 1982, that will add much to our understanding. The special lesbian history issue of Frontiers (vol. 4, no. 3; 1979), edited by Judith Schnars, is a basic starting point for lesbian history. Donald Vining’s memoir, A Gay Diary (New York: Pepys Press, 1979), is very suggestive about the impact of World War II. Allan Berube of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project (P.O. Box 42332, San Francisco 94101) has put together a talk and slide show, “Marching to a Different Drummer: Coming Out in World War II: A Slide/Talk with a Focus on Gay Men”; he is available to present it to classes and community groups. On DOB and lesbian life in the 1950s and 1960s, see Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, Lesbian/Woman (New York: Bantam

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John Lennon is dead, the victim of a senseless murder. The outpouring of grief in the wake of his death indicated how profoundly he touched the lives of people all over the world. Lennon symbolized the immense cultural upheavals of the 1960s. With humor and grace, he celebrated the contributions of youth, American blacks, and the working class of his native Britain to the new period which his songs helped usher in. We will miss him.