

# Placing Gay in the Sixties

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I was born in New York City in the opening years of the Cold War. My Italian-American family shared the conservative social, political, and cultural outlook of many Catholics during the crusade against communism. My parents loved Joe McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Robert Taft, and Barry Goldwater, and, as a child and an adolescent, I did, too. In high school speech and debate tournaments, I delivered trophy-winning orations about the wisdom of U.S. policy in South Vietnam and the need for the government to prevent labor strikes through a system of compulsory arbitration.

Arriving at Columbia's Morningside Heights campus as a freshman in the fall of 1966, I seemed to be immediately drawn into an unceasing effort to shed every vestige of my upbringing. In no time at all I was attending ecumenical services at which the renegade Catholic priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan gave antiwar sermons; I was dodging eggs thrown at me as I marched around campus protesting the administration's cooperation with the Selective Service system; I was running

through the streets of midtown Manhattan as police on horseback dispersed the crowds who had come to protest an appearance by Dean Rusk, the secretary of state; and I was picketing in front of the residences of New York City draft board members in the hope that, through their neighbors, we could shame them into resigning from what, to me, seemed a murderous occupation.

The "sixties" are the era that shaped me. I think of them with great nostalgia. I remember those times as thrilling, exhilarating, hopeful, exuberant. The universe cracked open and revealed to me endless possibilities. True, some of what it exposed seemed to be the face of evil itself: heartless politicians who ordered the bombing of peasant villages, National Guardsmen who shot to kill in urban ghettos, and police who beat students who were standing up for truth and justice. But it also displayed the irrepressible human spirit, the determination of ordinary people to speak truth to power, and the capacity of a generation to reimagine the world.

**T**he trouble with this picture is that, if you press me to talk about “the sixties,” almost every one of the stories that would spontaneously erupt from my memory are about events that occurred in the 1970s and are associated in one way or another with the gay liberation movement. At first glance this might seem odd, a glaring fault in the workings of my historian’s mind that should be very attuned to time and chronology. But I prefer to use it as the jumping off point for a useful observation about historical eras: the “sixties” are less a time period bound by the start and the end of a decade than they are about an era organically bound together by events, outlook, and mood. My guess is that for many gay men and lesbians, the “sixties” happened in the 1970s.

Gay liberation or, more broadly, homosexuality, is largely absent from historical accounts of the 1960s. It is the forgotten—perhaps, even, the unwanted—stepchild of the era. On the surface, this exclusion seems completely plausible; there is even a certain irrefutable logic to it. History as it is written, after all, is rarely the story of everything that happens but, instead, a narrative of what is salient, what marks a period in some special way. Since the power of homophobia in the post-World War II United States was so strong, it necessarily forced things gay into the background. When the gay liberation movement was finally born in response to the 1969 riots that occurred in Greenwich Village after New York City police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar, the 1960s were just about over. Thus a new era dawned for gay people just as the previous one was ending for everyone else.

But keeping gay out of the “sixties” also has an insidious, even if unintended, effect. It helps to shape a certain kind of interpretation of the 1960s, and a certain kind of interpretation of homosexuality and its place in American life. The view of the 1960s to which I refer has had a long shelf life. One can find it expressed in some of the first historical accounts of the decade, written in the early 1970s, and in some of the most recent assessments, published in

the mid-1990s.<sup>1</sup> It is an interpretation framed by the idea of declension, a dizzying rise and just as dizzying a fall of social forces and political movements that initially promised a new era of peace and justice in America. This version of the 1960s begins with the inspiration of black student sit-ins in the South and the idealistic rhetoric of the Kennedy presidency. It continues through the uplifting civil rights march on Washington and the historic civil rights legislation of mid-decade, and rises to the crescendo of reform embodied in Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. It ends with ghettos burning, troops occupying urban black neighborhoods, campuses in turmoil, rioting everywhere, and a presidential administration spying on its citizens and subverting the Constitution.

For historians writing sympathetically about the great popular movements of the 1960s, this outline embodies tragedy. What started hopefully ends despairingly; what began as unifying political impulses degenerated into harsh divisiveness. The inspiration of a militant but determinedly nonviolent civil rights movement and the vision of an early student New Left that imagined a world of peace and justice for everyone dissolved into movements whose rhetoric was polarizing and often filled with hatred, and whose concept of revolution involved picking up a gun. In other words, there is a "good" '60s and a "bad" '60s.

Now stop for a moment, think about this interpretive trajectory of rise and fall, and consider what the exclusion of gay from the 1960s inevitably does. By relegating it to the end of the story, to a brief mention of the Stonewall riots as the country is spinning out of control, historians inevitably imprison homosexuality and gay liberation in a narrative of decline. While millions of gay men and lesbians around the world look to 1969 as the dawn of a bright new age, everyone else reads it as part of the "bad" '60s and all that follows. And what is it that follows? Not the dawning of the age of Aquarius, as the young singers in the musical *Hair* proclaimed. Not the arrival of racial justice, world peace, and an equitable international economic order. Instead, the bad '60s ushers in a generation-long conservative ascendancy—the triumph of market principles, the dismantling of the welfare state, the decline of the public sector, increasing racial and ethnic polarization, a politics of greed, hatred, and resentment. This is where everything gay belongs. Thus, without exactly saying as much, gay becomes associated with reaction, backlash, and social decay. We might as well be reading Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the classic eighteenth-century work that tied Rome's collapse to sexual immorality.

I would like to suggest some ways in which gay can be put back into the 1960s. At the very least, my goal is to correct an exclusion. But I also think this

exercise can lead toward more creative ways of placing the 1960s in the stream of recent American history and of understanding what they were about—for those who lived through the era and for Americans today.

### **Gay as Echo**

One of the most invidious forms that homosexual oppression took in the United States during the Cold War was the psychology of separation and marginalization it enforced. Throughout this era, society found endless ways of repeating the message that there was something deeply wrong with being gay: homosexuality was sick, sinful, criminal, depraved, menacing. That message was enacted through police harassment and arrest, firings by employers, physical beatings by thugs, institutionalization by families. For most gay men and lesbians, the result was an abiding sense of difference, reinforced and magnified by the felt need to keep one's identity hidden, secret, and invisible. During these decades, mainstream America and its gay minority engaged in a quiet conspiracy to make it seem that nothing could be more removed from the trends and currents that characterized the nation's life than the experience or aspirations of its homosexual citizens.

Yet if we look closely at one significant expression of gay experience—and of the nation's—in the 1960s, we find not difference, not a huge gaping separation, but surprising parallels. In the realm of collective political action, the gay movement seemed to echo developments in the society around it.

The African American students who initiated the southern sit-in movement in February 1960 launched a kind of political activism that was new to the era. To be sure, the civil rights movement of the 1940s and 1950s had been vigorous and assertive. But its approach to change had come largely through the lobbying and litigation efforts of an organization like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. There had been important exceptions to the NAACP's legalistic approach—A. Philip Randolph's march on Washington movement during World War II; the targeted direct action campaigns of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in northern cities; the mass rallies in Washington organized by Bayard Rustin in the late 1950s; and, of course, the Montgomery bus boycott. But none of these activities seemed to provoke waves of imitators in the way that the action at a Woolworth's lunch counter did. After the Greensboro sit-in, citizen action took on a decidedly different flavor. Imbued with a conviction that justice was on their side, activists conducted themselves as if they were authorized to make change, as if their judgment about

right and wrong deserved precedence over the laws and customary procedures of the society in which they lived.

At the time of the sit-ins, a fragmentary gay and lesbian movement existed in the United States. The Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, the two primary organizations, had formed in the 1950s, published magazines, and were setting up chapters in a few major cities. But they were also caught within the constraints of the McCarthy era in which dissent and nonconformity carried a price. Gay was so far beyond the norm that these first spokespeople for homosexual equality felt obliged to rely, as one of them phrased it, on "pillars of the community" to make their case for them.<sup>2</sup> The early gay movement, in other words, doubted its ability—and authority—to speak on its own behalf. Instead, it depended on the goodwill of enlightened lawyers, doctors, and ministers to win a hearing from society.

By the early 1960s, with the model of the civil rights movement before them, new voices emerged among gay activists. Frank Kameny, an astronomer who had been fired from his government job for being gay and who, since most work in his field required a security clearance, was virtually unemployable, led and typified the more militant approach. He peppered his writings and speeches from these years with references to the struggle for civil rights. The Negro, he wrote in 1964, "tried for 90 years to achieve his purposes by a program of information and education. His achievements in those 90 years, while by no means nil, were nothing compared to those of the past ten years, when he tried a vigorous civil liberties, social action approach." Holding up as an example the self-confidence exhibited by nonviolent demonstrators in the South, he told a gay audience, "We cannot ask for our rights from a position of inferiority, or from a position, shall I say, as less than WHOLE human beings."<sup>3</sup>

Kameny amplified his confident assertion of self, which soon won him a bevy of allies in gay and lesbian organizations in the Northeast, in two forms of activist expression central to the spirit of the 1960s. One was a rebellion against authority. Whether it was southern sheriffs enforcing segregation statutes, or university administrators cooperating with the draft during the Vietnam War, or city governments ignoring the needs of the poor, or psychoanalysts describing woman's allegedly passive nature, authority found itself challenged on every front in the 1960s. Increasingly, the targets of institutional power insisted on the right to define their own experience and claim fully the power to shape their lives. In the case of homosexuality, the church and the medical profession were the twin pillars of cultural power, stigmatizing gay men and lesbians by rendering their sexual desires immoral or pathological. Kameny

roundly rejected the external authority of church and science. "I take the stand," he declared, "that not only is homosexuality . . . not immoral, but that homosexual acts engaged in by consenting adults are moral, in a positive and real sense, and are right, good, and desirable, both for the individual participants and for the society in which they live." As to the theorizing of medical scientists, Kameny's organization, the Mattachine Society of Washington, D.C., bluntly announced that "homosexuality is not a sickness, disturbance or pathology in any sense, but is merely a preference, orientation, or propensity, on par with, and not different in kind from, heterosexuality."<sup>4</sup>

The other activist form that Kameny appropriated was public protest. The civil rights movement and the antinuclear movement of the early 1960s had incorporated various forms of direct action into their repertoire of tactics. In doing so they won publicity, attracted new recruits, pressured the targets of their protests into making change or, by the resistance they provoked, aroused the supportive anger of their fellow citizens. But public protest by gay men and lesbians was no easy matter since it meant relinquishing the invisibility—the ability to pass—which protected individuals from sanctions. By the mid-1960s, protest had become so widespread in the United States—mostly around issues of racism, but increasingly about issues of war and peace as well—that some gay men and lesbians were willing to absorb the risk. In Washington, Kameny and others mounted picket lines outside the headquarters of the Civil Service Commission, the Pentagon, and the Department of State, all agencies implicated in the harassment and persecution of homosexuals. As the 1960s wore on, the impulse toward protest expanded, as did the targets of gay protesters, which included the police in Los Angeles, where several hundred gays rallied in the streets after a particularly violent police attack on a gay bar, and doctors known for their hostile views about gay life, when they spoke at a New York City medical school forum on homosexuality. In a number of cities, gay activists found themselves taking up the cry that African Americans had raised against police brutality, and calling for civilian review boards and other forms of citizen control over police behavior.

Before the end of the decade, gay activists were also following the lead of other social movements of the Left in the effort to create "alternative institutions" to replace what were seen as the corrupt oppressive institutions of liberal capitalism. In San Francisco and Los Angeles, the first gay newspapers were established. Designed to cover the news that the mainstream media ignored and to provide a different viewpoint on the stories that did appear, they especially exposed the police harassment which was endemic to gay life in that generation and pushed an ethic of gay pride. In 1968 Troy Perry convened the

first meeting of what became the Metropolitan Community Church, a nonsectarian Christian congregation founded to allow lesbians and gay men to worship without censure. In New York City, Craig Rodwell opened the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, stocking his shelves with gay titles that most bookstores eschewed and that many gay men and lesbians would have been too scared to buy in a mainstream retail establishment; soon it became more than a bookstore, serving as an informal community center for the exchange of news and information about gay politics and the gay community.

The gay echo could be heard not only in the arenas of collective protest and community organizing, phenomena quintessentially associated with the 1960s, but elsewhere as well. From the late 1950s through the mid-1960s the Supreme Court issued a series of decisions on the matter of censorship that dramatically expanded the range of expression protected by the First Amendment. In the course of the decade, writers and artists—and pornographers, too—expanded the boundaries within which creators of literature, art, photography, theater, and film worked. The formal power of Victorian sensibilities, surviving even several decades into the spread of a modernist outlook in the arts, was finally toppled. In its place, Americans found themselves possessors of a much more substantial freedom, as creators and consumers of cultural products, than had previously been the case.

Manifestations of gay experience can be found coursing through the mid-century cultural revolution that we identify with the “sixties”: in the San Francisco censorship trial of *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg’s controversial collection of poems, and the boost it gave to Beat cultural dissent; in the ability of a writer like James Baldwin to put sexual issues front and center in his fictional depiction of the ravages of racial conflict in contemporary America; in the shifting content of the Broadway theater, as expressed in a hit musical like *Cabaret*, which was based on the stories of Christopher Isherwood, a gay writer, and which portrayed a range of sexualities; in the explosive growth of the paperback pulp novel, sold in drugstores across the United States, which offered romance and sexual adventure for a broad spectrum of erotic sensibilities. It can also be found in the writings of a new breed of social scientists who, in the 1960s, were breaking with the detached pose that had characterized much intellectual work during the Cold War. Sociologists like Howard Becker, Erving Goffman, Edwin Schur, and Martin Hoffman frequently drew on the example of gay life and gay oppression to illustrate a theoretical perspective preoccupied with enlarging the sphere of human freedom. Martin Hoffman used the historical example of religious freedom and the Constitution to urge “radical tolerance for homosexual object-choice” as a solution to the “problem” of homosexuality. Writing in the one-

hundredth anniversary issue of *The Nation*, in 1965, Becker used the courage of lesbian activists to make the point that sex ought to be "the politics of the sixties" and that sexual expression ought to be one of the "inalienable" rights guaranteed to Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Rather than identify the Stonewall riots of June 1969 as the *birth* of gay liberation at the *end* of the 1960s, perhaps we would do better to see them for what they were: as symbolic of a shift that had been in the making for a number of years. Rather than containing homosexuality within a narrative structure of "rise and fall," perhaps we can use the eruption of a full-fledged gay freedom movement for a different interpretive purpose: as a sign of just how deeply the changes wrought by the 1960s reached into the structures and assumptions of American life. As Charles Kaiser wrote of the 1960s in *The Gay Metropolis*, a history of gay male life since World War II: "Because everything was being questioned, for a moment anything could be imagined—even a world in which homosexuals would finally win a measure of equality."<sup>6</sup> By noticing the many forms that the "gay echo" took in the 1960s, by including it in our historical repertoire of what the era provoked, we can interpret the '60s not as an era that failed, not as a story of declension, but as a watershed decade out of which nothing in American life emerged unchanged.

### **Gay as Sensibility**

I cringe a little when I look at that heading. The notion of a sensibility skirts the boundary of stereotyping. When applied to a social group, it smacks of the suggestion that there are some inherent characteristics that all members of a group share other than their oppression. In a gay context, the notion of sensibility also conjures up certain images and associations widely held in American culture—of camp and gender bending, of the aesthete and the dandy; of the sensitive young man of artistic bent. But I mean gay sensibility in another way, and am ascribing to it a content very different from what it usually has.

When I think about the 1960s, especially about what from the era has retained value and meaning for me across the decades, certain figures come into mind: James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, Bayard Rustin, Paul Goodman. None of them are the "top tier" names that we associate with the decade—Kennedy, King, Malcolm X, the Beatles, Dylan. Two of them, Rustin and Goodman, functioned far enough below the radar screen of history that one needs to be an aficionado of the 1960s even to know who they were. Yet, as one scans the decade, it is remarkable how they, and their influence, keep surfacing.



In many ways, these men were dramatically different from one another. Ginsberg was a poet of the cultural fringe, an artistic rebel whose verse ran along the edges of madness and who incorporated into his literary output a mystical spirituality that crisscrossed the boundaries of religious traditions. Without attachment to institutions or organizations, he wandered the globe in the 1950s and 1960s, somehow managing to make appearances at what proved to be key moments in the unfolding of the '60s. By contrast, Baldwin won mainstream success and plaudits, even as he often cultivated in his writing the stance of outsider. Where Ginsberg employed the frenzy of insanity in his verse, Baldwin's prose, whether in his fiction or in the essays that reached a mass audience in the decade, had a razor-sharp realism, a lucidity that left little room for confusion or ambiguity. Moving back and forth in the 1960s between the United States and Europe, he served almost as a roving conscience of the nation's racial crisis.

While Ginsberg and Baldwin moved primarily in the arena of literature (though heavily doused with social commentary), Rustin and Goodman operated, respectively, in the spheres of political activism and social criticism. In some ways, Rustin can be considered the "invisible hand" of 1960s activism. A Gandhian radical who came of age in the 1930s, he was a stalwart of the post-World War II peace and civil rights movement. Rustin was especially known for his command of the tactics and strategy of protest and social change. He was a close adviser of Martin Luther King, Jr., in the early stages of King's public career and played an important role in creating for King a national profile; he trained a large number of the key younger activists of the 1960s; and he was the mastermind behind the historic 1963 March on Washington. A practical, hardnosed realist, he was always looking for the ways that progressive change, whether in the realm of international affairs or America's racial order, might be institutionalized and made permanent. While Goodman cared about progressive social policy, he was more the utopian, imagining ideal systems. When he did address himself to what he called "practical proposals," he devoted little energy to detailing the political strategy of making them achievable. A philosopher by training, Goodman wrote prolifically, and his books and essays critiquing American education and examining the role of youth in modern society won him a wide appreciative audience among the students who constituted the New Left of the 1960s.

To me, the differences among the four are of the formal variety, the kind that surface when one is pigeonholing an individual with a short tag line: poet; political organizer; philosopher. What they had in common ran much deeper.

One area of experience they shared was homosexual attraction and, to varying degrees, a public profile as gay or bisexual. In the late 1990s, this may not seem to be much to share, or even especially significant. So many men have come out of the closet, and gay life is so visible, that we are more easily aware of the differences—of class, race, ethnicity, and political viewpoint. How much, after all, do a gay Republican and a queer nationalist, a gay union activist and a gay corporate executive, a gay rock star and a gay waiter, have in common? But in the 1950s and 1960s, secrecy and invisibility were core features of the gay experience and, though there was a well-developed public discourse about homosexuality, most of it was condemnatory and written from the outside. A generation ago, then, gay was an even more powerful marker of identity than it is now, and few chose to have themselves marked in this way. To be public implied either great trouble or great integrity, or both.

Ginsberg embraced homosexual passion openly. For those in attendance, his 1955 public reading in San Francisco of "Howl," a poem that described gay sexuality as joyous and holy, seemed to crystallize the literary and cultural movement known as Beat, itself a portent of the sixties. The censorship trial in 1957 gave the slim book of poetry a wide audience, and as the media began to spotlight the Beat rebellion, Ginsberg became perhaps the most visible homosexual in America. Baldwin, too, could be considered openly gay by virtue of what he chose to write, though the codes of discretion observed in the 1950s and 1960s meant that one was generally not labeled gay unless one committed a misdeed or made a public declaration of identity. Nevertheless, the fact that Baldwin published a gay novel, *Giovanni's Room*, and peopled his bestseller of the early 1960s, *Another Country*, with gay characters, marked him in the eyes of the knowledgeable as queer.

Rustin's case was different from either Ginsberg's or Baldwin's in that he never chose to have his homosexuality be a matter of public record. Within his circle of friends and political associates, Rustin was quietly open about his sexual and emotional leanings as early as the 1940s, an unusual choice for a gay man to make in those years. But his sexuality also became a matter of public controversy on several occasions because of the trouble it brought his way. While imprisoned as a conscientious objector during World War II, he was confronted with charges of sexual misconduct on the eve of an inmate strike that he was organizing against racial segregation. In 1953, while on a speaking tour in southern California, he was arrested and convicted for homosexual activity. Then, in 1963, shortly before the march on Washington that Rustin was coordinating, he had the dubious distinction of being labeled, in a Senate speech by Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a sexual pervert.

Goodman's situation was more complex, since he married twice and was the father of three children. A political and philosophical anarchist, he seemed to delight in injecting matters of sex into situations not typically defined as sexual. It was a propensity that, in more than one case, cost him a job, including a position at the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina. But Goodman was also bold enough to write openly about homosexuality. The subject appeared in *Growing Up Absurd*, his commentary about youth and education, which was extremely influential among radical college students in the 1960s. It also surfaced in his poetry and fiction, which was heavily autobiographical.

As I suggested above, gay identity may not seem such an overriding commonality at the turn of the new millennium, all the hoopla about "Ellen" coming out notwithstanding. But a generation ago, it was a big deal. Whether it happened by choice or imposition, assuming a public profile as a sexual *deviant*, as someone heavily stigmatized by the overwhelming weight of cultural opinion, meant taking on a characteristic of which one was always aware. It branded one's consciousness with a marker of difference, even if one had the independence of character to resist the negative definition that American society attached to it. It necessarily made one perpetually aware of separation, of division in the body of humanity, of marginalization and ostracism. Admittedly, Rustin and Baldwin as African Americans and Ginsberg and Goodman as Jews living in the wake of the Holocaust had other reasons to experience exclusion. Yet Jews and African Americans also had access to strong traditions of community that homosexuals in America did not.

As I think about these four men and try to make sense out of what they offered the United States in the 1960s, the abiding perception of estrangement that America's sexual order forced upon them leads me to highlight a second commonality among them. Each in his own way functioned as an apostle of hope. Each held out the conviction that the bitter conflicts and the cruel inequalities that caused deep rifts in American society could be overcome. Each believed in an ideal of community expansive enough to include everyone.

In the case of Bayard Rustin, this claim is easy to make. A Quaker by upbringing, in the early 1940s he abjured his involvement with the communist movement in the United States in part because he rejected the unscrupulousness of its methods—the willingness to rationalize any tactic or strategy if it seemed to advance the final conflict in the international war of the classes. Instead, he chose allegiance to a Gandhian philosophy of *satyagraha*—"truth-force" or "love-force"—with its commitment to active but nonviolent resistance to injustice. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, in his pacifist activities and in his work to

challenge American racism, Rustin faced personal danger again and again without deviating from his attachment to a respectful nonviolence designed to win over his opponent. In his many speeches in these decades, he reiterated his belief that the evil at the heart of war and racism was the sundering of human community, the shattering of a natural impulse toward love and fellowship.

For Rustin, whose sexuality and political radicalism together placed him at the fringe of American life in the Cold War decades, the March on Washington in August 1963 was a revelatory moment. It was not simply that the event's spirit and tone seemed to capture perfectly the sense of unity and community toward which he was always striving in his work. The support that the march won seemed to promise the mainstreaming of a social vision; the power that the march embodied suggested the political ability to implement the vision as well. And so Rustin, who had lived and worked on the margin for his entire adult life, devoted himself in the middle years of the 1960s—before the spirit of the decade had shifted from the “good '60s” to the “bad '60s”—to arguing for a shift “from protest to politics.” He believed that the progressive forces in the United States had to find allies, work in coalition, and shift from a rigid outsider mentality as protesters to a more flexible ability to engage the political and economic system from the inside. He believed that the civil rights movement, the emerging white student movement, and the expanding peace movement could forge ties with the churches, organized labor, intellectuals, and the most socially conscious of American liberals. Together they could build a broad progressive alliance capable of becoming the working majority of the Democratic Party and of transforming the American political economy.

We can never know, of course, whether such a strategy, if initiated and pursued by the democratic Left in the United States, might have worked in those years. We do know that it was embraced by very few. Major segments of the black freedom movement instead chose a more militant politics that polarized, that created lines of division, that despaired of winning over white America, and particularly white liberals, to their side. Major segments of the white student movement came to see liberalism as intrinsically compromised through its connection to a U.S. capitalist world order. Major segments of the peace movement placed their opposition to U.S. policy in Southeast Asia above their commitment to peace and reconciliation, and built an antiwar movement that was at least as anti-American as it was antimilitarist, and that supported uncritically the militarism of the other side.

All of these developments, central to how the 1960s unfolded, signified in important ways a politics that intertwined rage and despair. And, to many of the actors in these dramas, Rustin's perspective seemed to be a politics of compro-

mise and betrayal. But I wonder if it is not more accurate to see Rustin's efforts as a continuing commitment, under the changed conditions of the 1960s, to reach for unity by building a movement meant to embrace an ever larger part of the American nation. Rustin, in other words, was offering not crass compromise but wild hope, the hope that the vivid exposure of injustice and evil, combined with practical politics, might lead to renewal, to the restoration of community.

One could make a comparable claim for Baldwin in these years. Like many African American cultural figures in the twentieth century, Baldwin chose the existence of an expatriate in France as a way of escaping the grueling, insistent cruelties of white America's racism. But as the civil rights movement became the most dynamic social and political force in the United States, Baldwin spent more time on this side of the Atlantic. He rallied other black artists, met with members of the Kennedy administration, and appeared at major public forums with political activists like Rustin. And, always, he wrote—both the fiction which was at the heart of his creativity as an artist but also substantial essays in which he commented on the state of the United States.

At first glance it might seem strange to label Baldwin a voice of hope in the 1960s. To be white, as I am, and to read either *The Fire Next Time* or *Another Country*, his two widely read books of the first half of the 1960s, is inevitably to squirm. Whether as novelist or essayist, Baldwin was unflinching in his description of racism and its impact on African Americans, and merciless in his indictment of whites. "This is the crime," he wrote in *The Fire Next Time*, "of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."<sup>7</sup> In *Another Country* he depicts various sexual couplings of blacks and whites mangling each other with the sharp edges of their society's racial history. He dressed down Robert Kennedy, the attorney general, for the inadequacies of the Justice department's initiatives on race; he exploded with fury after the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young black girls.

But Baldwin, like Rustin, believed that redemption could only come if one looked injustice squarely in the face and named it. His critique was meant as pathway to another place. "We can make America what America must become," he wrote.<sup>8</sup> Choosing to close *Another Country* on a note of hope, he uses his gay characters to deliver the message. He ends with a young French gay man arriving in New York, embracing his new country and his American lover.

As with Baldwin, one can find in both Ginsberg and Goodman this dual perspective: the naming of all that is wrong with modern America yet, still, a message of hope. Whether it be Ginsberg leading a gathering of hippies in a

Buddhist chant in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park or Goodman determinedly producing one of his utopian essays, the two of them projected some measure of optimism about the ability of right-thinking Americans to chart a saner course for a nation that by the late 1960s did seem to be spinning out of control. Like Baldwin, too, their note of hope oftentimes seemed attached to their experience of gay sexuality. In an essay Goodman published late in 1969, he explicitly addressed his gay identity and the politics of homosexuality. "In my observation and experience," he argued, "queer life has some remarkable political values. It can be profoundly democratizing, throwing together every class and group more than heterosexuality does. Its promiscuity can be a beautiful thing."<sup>9</sup> Frank in his criticism about the things that were not right with gay male life, he nonetheless saw it as a counter to the coldness and fragmentation that characterized contemporary America.

Now let me be clear, at least, about what I am *not* saying. I am not trying to claim that there is something about male homosexuality and gay life that inherently points gay men in the direction of community and makes them messengers of hope in a fractious society. I am not saying that this is even true of gay men as a group in this particular era of history. But imagine, for a minute, other groupings of key male activists or engaged cultural workers associated with the 1960s. If I had chosen Stokely Carmichael, Norman Mailer, Malcolm X, and Jerry Rubin, would the themes of hope and community so readily emerge?

I am trying to point our attention to an opening, an unobserved window onto an understanding of the 1960s. When we look at the careers of the four men I have highlighted, at the animating vision behind their work, we find something that stands outside an interpretation that emphasizes failure. Not, mind you, because they succeeded, or because their dreams of a new world were realized, but because they felt impelled to hold them out steadfastly to the rest of us, and to hold on to them for themselves in the years that followed. I think there is reason to believe that, in the mid-twentieth century, the experience of gay oppression provided a particular angle of vision that brought certain themes, aspirations, and civic desires to the foreground. If we dig more deeply, what might emerge from excavating this territory? Can we learn something different about the 1960s? Does it allow us more readily to imagine placing gay back into the 1960s and seeing the decade, accordingly, in new ways?

### **Gay as Harbinger**

In questioning the persistence of a "rise-and-fall" interpretation of the 1960s, I am not offering in its place the inverse: a story of the great march forward of

progressive social and economic change. Anyone who has lived through the last decades knows that we are in the middle of an era of conservative ascendancy. In the realm of party politics, the number of Republicans has grown, and the party has moved to the right; the number of Democrats has shrunk, and the party has moved to the right. The changing tax structure and the balancing of the federal budget, the direction of social policy as evidenced by the debates over welfare, the growing disparities in income and wealth, and the composition of the federal judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court, are some of the more obvious indicators of the shift. And the conservative wave has not yet crested.

Even as we acknowledge this, we also cannot escape the fact that there are living legacies of the 1960s. Without the civil rights and black power movements of those years, we would not as a society be debating today the merits of multiculturalism. Without the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s, we would not today find women just about everywhere in public life. And without the broad cultural shifts that the era induced, we would not be living today with something thoroughly new in the history of modern Western societies—a mass movement for freedom of homosexual expression.

Yet all of these legacies, and probably others we could name as well, are still being fought over. None are secure; none offer predictable futures. If we define the dynamic edge of the 1960s as those forces campaigning for a just and equitable society, it is difficult to identify what is permanent about the decade's achievements *and* how those achievements position the nation to move once again in those directions. What, in other words, can the outcome of the 1960s tell us about what is to come and how it will materialize? What of the 1960s still resides with us so that a peaceful world, a fair distribution of wealth, and a civic culture in which no social groups experience forced exclusion or subordination, come closer to realization?

Let me suggest that a productive approach to these questions, and to understanding the post-'60s United States as something other than the triumph of reaction at home and abroad, might come through a look at gay America in the last generation.

One way of seeing gay as a carrier of the era's legacy is simply by acknowledging the history of the gay and lesbian movement since the end of the 1960s. By the 1970s, the black freedom struggle was in disarray, divided and wary about the future. Feminism retained a dynamic quality for much of the 1970s, but the growth of a vigorous anti-abortion movement in the second half of the decade, and the final defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982, put the women's movement on the defensive. By contrast, the gay and lesbian move-

ment has over the last thirty years grown in size, extended its influence, and expanded its list of achievements. This has not happened at a steady pace; there have been reversals and setbacks along the way. But, overall, it is remarkable that, in the midst of a deepening conservative impulse in U.S. political life, this movement for social justice has marched forward.

One can point to a number of concrete measures of change. Since the late 1960s, a majority of states have repealed sodomy laws that were as old as the nation and that led to the arrest and conviction of large numbers of Americans every year. In several states, and most of the nation's large cities, civil rights law has been expanded to ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The federal government, which prohibited through much of the Cold War the employment of gay men and lesbians in *any* government job, has gradually relaxed these restrictions until only military service remains inaccessible. The American Psychiatric Association has eliminated the classification of homosexuality as a disease, which for decades had not only served to stigmatize gay and lesbian relationships, but also led to the involuntary institutionalization of many people.

At the level of social life and daily experience, it is not too much to say that, for millions of gay men and lesbians, the changes of the last three decades have been nothing short of revolutionary. The constant, incessant fear of discovery and punishment has abated. The sense of carrying a dreadful stigma has lifted. Instead of being weighed down by a terrible loneliness that the enforced secrecy and invisibility a homophobic society had imposed, gays and lesbians have created vibrant communities with robust institutions. Whereas in the early 1960s one could, at best, hope to find some bars where homosexuals could meet, gay men and lesbians in the last generation have invested heavily in the construction of organizations and institutions to knit people together. There are churches and synagogues for expressions of religious faith. There are health clinics, youth organizations, family services, senior citizen groups, and twelve-step programs to care for people's physical and psychological well-being. There are community centers that house an endless array of activities and services. There are political action and advocacy organizations designed to express the collective voice of the community in public affairs. There are bowling and softball leagues, bridge tournaments, running clubs, and outdoors groups that make recreation a community-building experience. Bookstores, arts and film festivals, conferences for writers, and theater workshops foster cultural expression and intellectual life. Among gay men and lesbians the impulse toward community building, certainly one of the signature impulses of the 1960s, has been extraordinary. It may not be too much to claim that, in a generation in which jeremi-



ads about the collapse of community in America are commonplace, many gay men and lesbians have become the repository of vital wisdom about valuing and maintaining a vigorous communal life.

As with community life, so too with citizen action and empowerment. In an era in which disgust with politics and citizen apathy are widespread, in which the only mobilizations seem to be the armies of Christian conservatives on the march, the gay and lesbian community has been an important counterpoint—even though its significance has been largely ignored by progressives in the United States. At the level of both local and national politics, the community has been in an almost constant state of political agitation over the last twenty years. Some of what it has done looks like the routine operation of “interest group” politics. Thus, there are now about three dozen state federations, none of which existed twenty-five years ago. They lobby, coordinate constituent visits to the legislature, conduct voter registration, and sometimes organize statewide mobilizations. But just as often the gay and lesbian movement has kept alive a tradition of direct action and community organizing that one associates with the best of the 1960s. In 1987 and again in 1993, national marches on Washington brought out more people than any demonstration of the 1960s. Gays and lesbians organized a mass civil disobedience outside the Supreme Court in 1987, the largest ever mounted against the venerable institution. The direct action protests of AIDS activists in the late 1980s and early 1990s built on the tactics developed by civil rights and antiwar demonstrators of the 1960s and extended by the antinuclear agitators of the late 1970s. They adapted the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience to an MTV-, media-saturated generation, devising eye-catching and attention-grabbing forms of protest. Today, groups like Digital Queers are pioneering ways of adapting cyberspace to the requirements of political organizing.

I know that, for some Americans, the above paragraphs about the flowering of a gay community and gay politics read like a litany of what’s wrong with our country. For political and religious conservatives the growth of the gay movement and the rise of visible gay communities are elements of moral decay, and they have no difficulty in saying so, as public statements by Trent Lott, the Senate majority leader, Gary Bauer, a former Reagan administration official who now leads the Family Research Council, and William Bennett, a conservative educator and best-selling author, make clear. And I suspect that many on the Left, many liberals and progressives, also experience varying levels of discomfort at the spread of sexual identity politics. While they would not object to the existence of a gay movement, the steady injection of gay issues into public debate seems to them symptomatic of the collapse of the serious politics of the

1960s. Instead of an insistent focus on matters like the U.S. global economic imperialism, justice for African Americans and immigrants of color, economic democracy and the welfare state, politics has devolved into a concern with mere lifestyle issues, into trivial inessential topics like sexual freedom.

But even the ground on which an American progressive tradition has staked itself—democratic participation, expanded notions of equality, justice for all—offers a firm footing for gay agitation. If the essence of being gay or lesbian concerns the pursuit of love, affection, intimacy and passion, if it is about the building of close human relationships, then surely it is a good thing that police across the country no longer arrest tens of thousands of people every year for something as innocent as holding hands in a bar. Surely it is a good thing that, when men and women have epithets thrown at them and baseball bats swung in their direction, they feel entitled to expect that the police will apprehend the assailants rather than add to the pain of the assault. Surely it is a good thing that a group of citizens is not formally excluded from major segments of the labor market. Surely it is a good thing when they do not have to worry that the discovery of the most loving relationships in their lives could mean the loss of their livelihood.

There is yet a second, perhaps more important way in which gay not only carries forward the legacy of the 1960s but points us toward what a new progressive political vision might embody. Increasingly since the early 1970s, political conflict and social justice struggles have developed around matters that once were defined as existing within the realm of private or personal life. Increasingly, sexuality and the family have become the fulcrum not only of public discourse but of policy debates and policy making as well. The list of issues is a long one: abortion, contraception, and reproductive rights; sex education and teenage pregnancy; censorship of the arts and the Internet; wife battering, incest, and the abuse of children; no-fault divorce laws and single-parent families; rape and sexual harassment; AIDS funding and prevention strategies; and, of course, the panoply of issues connected to the gay movement. Without too much effort, most of us can probably also generate a list of headline-making scandals, paralleling each of these issues, that mesmerized the public for long stretches of time.

Interestingly, the shift of sexual and family-based matters from the realm of the private to the center of national politics has even reshaped how issues more typically associated with the quest for economic and social justice are debated. From the presidency of Ronald Reagan through the rewriting of federal welfare law in 1996, the suggestion of sexual immorality threaded its way through the public discourse about welfare. Nativist attacks on immigrants and

the renewed call to restrict the number of foreigners admitted to the United States are often rife with allusions to the procreative excess of immigrant populations: their children allegedly will overrun the schools and drain the resources of other public services.

There are good reasons why, even as the remnants of the U.S. Left rail against the North American Free Trade Agreement, the International Monetary Fund, and the depredations of global capitalism, sex and the family agitate our body politic. The connections between macro-level world economics and the micro-reality of personal life are real and substantial. As the movement of global capital and the fluctuation of world currency markets make us subject to powers beyond individual control, the need for dignity, security, and freedom at the level of intimate relationships and the uses of the body have become more important than ever. Solutions to problems in these areas, of course, cannot be divorced from changes in the rules of international economics. But a politics of economic and social justice that doesn't attend openly to the felt insecurities and aspirations of people at the level of the intimate won't bring folks to the barricades either. The extension of long-standing traditions of democratic rights to incorporate the realm of the intimate, and the reframing of long-standing battles for economic and social justice in ways that incorporate the sexual behavior of peoples, seem to be a requisite for a next cycle of progressive politics and social change.

Embedded in the rise of a people who call themselves gay are some gripping questions about how capitalist societies have evolved in the twentieth century and how they might be reorganized. What has made possible the coalescence of a group of people who choose to live outside a reproductive family unit? What can this development tell us about the changing relationship of the family and the individual to economic life in an increasingly global capitalist order? What options for personal freedom *and* for new forms of community does it offer? How might "family" come to look different and have new and expanded meanings? How might we want consciously to change the structure of economic life in order to encourage the range of options that people choose in pursuit of intimacy, family, and community? Are the present ways that capitalism orders life—the privatization of reproduction and child rearing; the demand that more and more adults be drawn into the labor market; the shrinking resources available to the nuclear family—the best way to do things?

When gay liberation and lesbian feminism emerged at the end of the 1960s, these were the kinds of questions they put on the table. As movements, they not only offered incisive critiques of the organization of the family, sexuality, and gender, but they also developed in their practice ways of living that looked

beyond the "Ozzie and Harriet" version of private life. New forms of invented kinship, new ways of fostering community, even new forms of conceiving children and raising them, were bred into the bones of these young liberation movements. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic dramatized, for those people curious enough to notice, that gay America carried within it an ethic of family and community that was deep and broad. In death as well as in life it turned out that a people stereotyped for their isolation and loneliness were able to draw into their circle caring friends, lovers, former lovers, the friends of their former lovers—people, in other words, without the formal legalistic relation of family that normally defines the limits of our personal responsibility. The compassion-numbing conservatism of the country in the late 1990s makes all this seem distant; even within the gay community, the public battle seems to have devolved into a quest for marriage. But this should not obscure for us that out of the 1960s emerged a movement that took the decade's ideals, applied them to the realm of the intimate, and over the last generation struggled against great odds to realize new meanings for human freedom and social justice.

In September 1997, in Washington, D.C., the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force held its annual Honoring Our Allies reception. As the name implies, the event is designed to acknowledge that gays and lesbians are not fighting for their rights alone and without help. That year, the honorees included Coretta Scott King, the widow of the slain civil rights leader, and John Sweeney, who had recently been elected president of the AFL-CIO; Senator Edward Kennedy presented the award to Mrs. King. The evening brought together sixty years of the progressive tradition of the United States: the labor movement, which defined the militant social justice politics of the Depression decade; the civil rights movement, which propelled progressive politics forward in the 1960s; and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, which has been the electoral force that has institutionalized elements of a progressive vision of economic and social life in America. And the instigator of the evening was the movement which, in this conservative era, has tried to keep alive and extend a progressive American tradition.

It will be at least a while yet before a new progressive politics asserts itself as a dynamic shaping force in American society. But when it happens, as it certainly will, this even newer Left will inevitably draw upon its sense of history and the relevance of historical traditions that preceded it. It will be stronger if it is able to look to a 1960s, so emblematic of protest and political passion, in which gay is thoroughly integral, and if it acknowledges a more recent past in which gay has carried legacies from the 1960s forward, along the way enriching our sense of what freedom and social justice might mean.

## NOTES

1. See, as examples, Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973); Milton Viorst, *Fire in the Streets: America in the 1960s* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979); Allen Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984); Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987); James Miller, *"Democracy Is in the Streets": From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

2. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983; 2nd edition, 1998), p. 149. The information on the pre-Stonewall gay movement in this and the following paragraphs comes from chapters 8 through 12. Citations identify the location of quotations.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 153, 164.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

6. Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 138.

7. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963; Laurel edition), p. 15.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9. Paul Goodman, "Being Queer," in *Crazy Hope and Finite Experience: Final Essays of Paul Goodman*, ed. Taylor Stoehr (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), p. 109.