


Introduction

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Guided Readings: America in Ferment - The Tumultuous 1960s

Gay and Lesbian Liberation

Early in the morning of June 27, 1969, New York City police staged a raid on the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village bar whose patrons included transvestites, gay men, and lesbians. Raids on gay or cross-dressers' bars were common at the time. State law threatened bars with the loss of their liquor licenses if they tolerated same-sex dancing or employed or served men who wore women's clothing. Instead of acquiescing passively in the raid, the bar's patrons fought back, battling the police with bricks, bottles, and shards of broken glass. Three days of civil disobedience followed.

This incident ushered in a new era for gays and lesbians in the United States: an era of pride, openness, and activism. It led many gays and lesbians to "come out of the closet" and publicly assert their sexual identity and organize politically. In Stonewall's wake, activist organizations like the Gay Liberation Front transformed sexual orientation into a political issue, attacking customs and laws that defined homosexuality as a sin, a crime, or a mental illness.

Hostility toward homosexuality had deep roots in American society. State sodomy laws criminalized homosexual acts. Federal immigration laws excluded homosexual aliens. The 1873 Comstock Act permitted postal authorities to exclude homosexual publications from the mail, while Hollywood's "Production Code," adopted in 1934, prohibited the depiction of gay characters or open discussion of homosexuality in film. The American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual defined homosexuality as a psychopathology. During the McCarthy era, the charge that homosexuals were "moral perverts" and security risks led the government to adopt rules explicitly excluding them from federal jobs or military service. Police entrapment of homosexual men and harassment of gay bars were widespread; during the 1950s, cities such as Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. police arrested 100 men a month on misdemeanor charges relating to homosexuality.

Although the emergence of the gay and lesbian liberation movement caught the general public by surprise, it did not emerge overnight. During the 1950s, a handful of advocacy groups, including the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, arose, opposing laws that prohibited and punished homosexuality. By the late 1960s, gay and lesbian subcultures and communities had grown in many of the nation's cities, complete with bars, cabarets, magazines, and restaurants.

At the same time, challenges to earlier legal and medical opinion about homosexuality appeared. Alfred Kinsey's studies of sexual behavior, published in 1948 and 1953, suggested that homosexual and lesbian behavior was far more prevalent than most Americans previously suspected. Kinsey estimated about 10 percent of men and 5 percent of women were sexually attracted primarily to members of their own sex. During the 1960s, reformers within the legal profession argued in favor of decriminalizing private, consensual adult homosexual relations, on the grounds that government should not regulate private morality. In 1961, Illinois became the first state to repeal its sodomy statutes. The next year the Supreme Court ruled that a magazine featuring photographs of male nudes was not obscene and therefore not subject to censorship. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its list of psychopathologies.

In recent years, homosexuality has become one of the most highly charged issues in American politics. In 1986 the Supreme Court upheld state sodomy laws, ruling that private acts of homosexuality were not protected by the Constitution. Gay advocacy groups responded to the decision by lobbying for passage of state and city civil rights acts that would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and housing. As a result of the gay rights movement, two states--New York and Vermont--and several municipalities, extended health and dental insurance to the gay and lesbian domestic partners of public employees. A number of municipalities and states, including Colorado, responded to these initiatives by passing referenda prohibiting government from extending special rights to homosexuals. But state courts found these to be unconstitutional infringements on the right of gay and lesbian citizens to petition government. In 1993, a major controversy erupted after President Bill Clinton proposed allowing gays and lesbians to openly serve in the military. The policy that eventually emerged--nicknamed "don't ask, don't tell"--satisfied few, and federal courts refused to permit the expulsion of gays from the military.

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