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From “Black is Beautiful” to “Gay Power”: Cultural Frames in the Gay Liberation Movement

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The 1960s and 1970s were a decade of turbulence, militancy, and unrest in America. The post-World War II boom in consumerism and consumption made way for a new post-materialist societal ethos, one that looked past the American dream of home ownership and material wealth. Many citizens were now concerned with social and economic equality, justice for all people of the world, and a restructuring of the capitalist system itself. According to Max Elbaum, the traditional narrative of the 1960s begins with an “idealistic, impassioned” youth working on voter registration and civil rights and ends with “days of rage as the sixties movement, frustrated by the Vietnam War, became irrational and self-destructive.”ⁱ What started out as middle-class students organizing in the South for civil rights slowly transformed into “the emergence of the New Left, the antiwar movement, women’s liberation, and identity based politics.”ⁱⁱ

The New Left protest groups of this decade are important to gay radicalism because they created the foundational strategies for future gay activism.ⁱⁱⁱ Although Homophile organizations existed in the 1940s and 1950s, gay radicalism did not fully blossom until the language, style, and strategies of the New Left emerged during the decade of discontent, chiefly embodied by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Black Panther Party.^{iv} In Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin’s view, “the New Left was a profoundly American movement, inspired by the civil rights movement, and fashioning its early political beliefs from a combination of American radical traditions.”^v Originally, the New Left focused on social justice issues – poverty, race, equality – through conscience raising events. Eventually, as the Vietnam War escalated, and the stark realities of American imperialism became more apparent, many adopted a militant approach.^{vi}

The scholarly literature of gay history explains that gay liberation and gay rights groups have borrowed and adopted the various frames and strategies of previous protest movements. This paper seeks to understand the direct connections between homophile and gay liberation groups and previous social movements in the United States using cultural framing theory. To accomplish this, I explore two of the more powerful and resonant frames: the “Gay is Good” and “Gay Power” frames, both of which were adopted from the American Civil Rights Movement and Black Power respectively. This paper is not meant to imply a unidirectional relationship; I simply focus on two of the many frames employed by gay liberation and gay rights groups.

Gay radicalism may easily be placed within the larger New Left struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. Following the turbulent Stonewall Riots of 1969, a new form of activism emerged – gay liberation.^{vii} Many of the narratives regarding gay liberation mark Stonewall as the beginning of the movement, both in scholarly literature and public memory. Popular myth places those riots as the origin of the gay liberation movement. To some, Stonewall began all gay activism. David Carter writes, “it is also commonly asserted that the riot...marked the beginning of the gay rights movement.”^{viii} Simon Hall concurs, offering Stonewall as the “year zero” of “public consciousness and historical memory.”^{ix} As John D’Emilio and numerous others have shown, Stonewall was not the ground zero of activism.^x Meaghan Nappo explains that Stonewall simply possesses a large mnemonic capacity that allows for a unified “beginning” in the collective memory of many individuals, both within and outside of

the gay community.^{xi} Others have asserted the myth of Stonewall was a conscious effort on the part of gay liberation activists, to provide a simple breaking point between the assimilationists and single issue focus of 1950s homophile groups and the new liberation strategies of the Gay Liberation Front after Stonewall.^{xii}

While this origin story is contested in the literature, Stonewall did have a direct impact; a few days after the riot, the Gay Liberation Front of New York (GLF/NY) was formed.^{xiii} The GLF/NY quickly adopted “the rhetoric of political manifestos” from the numerous “self-identified minority group activist organizations.”^{xiv} Within a year, gay liberation organizations sprouted in many American cities, including Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and Detroit.^{xv}

The Gay Liberation Front (GLF) was a new type of organization within the larger gay community. Co-opting the language of other liberation groups, the GLF began to distribute information and hold meetings. Flyers read, “Do you think homosexuals are revolting? You bet your sweet ass we are. We’re going to make a place for ourselves and the revolutionary movements. We challenge the myths that are screwing up society.”^{xvi} Another flyer asked homosexuals to join the organization “to examine how we are oppressed and how we oppress ourselves and to fight for gay control of gay businesses,” reminiscent of the Black Panther’s call of self-sufficiency.^{xvii} The general ethos of gay groups changed from the assimilation strategies of homophile groups to the liberationist tactics of the 1960s.^{xviii} In fact, Marxism was prevalent in many of these groups, and the pre-Stonewall “homophile goal of tolerance for homosexuals” was inadequate; “sexual freedom required structural change, not just changes in laws.”^{xix}

In an effort to resolve the dilemma of resource mobilization and political process theory that does not account for cultural elements and ideas, David Snow and others have written extensively on the framing processes of social movement groups and actors.^{xx} In fact, according to Doug McAdam et al., it was the importance of culture elements that differentiated new social movements from the old.^{xxi} For this essay, I borrow Mayer Zald’s traditional definition of culture as “the shared beliefs and understanding, mediated by and constituted by symbols and language, of a group or society.”^{xxii} Likewise, frames are the “specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events.”^{xxiii}

From “Black is Beautiful” to “Gay is Good”

The genesis of “Gay is Good” as a slogan and a cultural frame is easy to determine. As stated earlier, many gay organizations groups adopted tactics, rhetoric, and strategies from previous social protest movements. The most common example is the Civil Rights movement, which framed their grievances in relation to civil liberties and equality for all. “Gay is Good” is directly adopted from the “black is beautiful” movement of the 1960s.^{xxiv} In an effort to combat the racial stereotypes of ugly physical features, various black rights groups sought to recuperate the “maligned, defiled, [and] destroyed black body” of the past.^{xxv}

Franklin Kameny was the primary figure of the “Gay is Good” frame. A co-founder of the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC, Kameny became increasingly vocal of his displeasure with the homophile movement’s assimilationist tendencies. Speaking at a convention of the Mattachine Society of N.Y. in 1964, Kameny asserted his beliefs against “the homophile obsession with discovering the cause of homosexuality and the organization’s deferment to the psychology establishment’s labeling of homosexuality as a mental sickness.”^{xxvi} He introduced the idea of homosexuality as not an illness, but a “characteristic marking a particular group of people.”^{xxvii} According to Stephen M. Engel, Kameny used the cultural frame of the civil rights movement, contending that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) did not worry about which gene caused black skin; they were only interested in securing fairness and

equality.^{xxviii} This is a prime example of frame alignment – the act of interpreting a group’s cause or goals with already created and culturally understood concepts.^{xxix} As much of the literature attests, this civil rights frame is one of the more widely used in American protest movements.^{xxx}

The following year, as head of the newly formed Washington, DC, chapter of Mattachine, Kameny reemphasized this point. Speaking at the 1965 Eastern Region Conference of Homophile Organizations (ERCHO) he stated that “homosexuality is not a sickness, disturbance, or other pathology in any sense, but is merely a preference, orientation, or propensity, on par with, and not different in kind from, heterosexuality.”^{xxxi} Just as the Black Power movement combated racial stereotypes, Kameny was beginning to create the foundation of “Gay is Good” as a new way to view one’s own homosexuality and, in turn, influence a greater societal acceptance.

The formal acceptance of the slogan was approved in 1968 at the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations, which adopted “Gay is Good” in its official platform. The homophile movement, which was pre-Gay Liberation, had officially shifted its focus from a quiet campaign of acceptance to a more aggressive stance demanding equal access, rights, and fairness within existing political and societal institutions. The key to note is that Homophile groups still wanted to change these existing structures; gay liberation, as with other liberation groups, would focus on a complete destruction of the structures themselves.

Franklin Kameny, writing in his essay titled “Gay is Good,” asserts the parallel between “Black is Beautiful” and “Gay is Good” was a conscious effort. He writes the slogan was a “parallel effort to replace negative feelings up on the part of the homosexual... with the positive feelings of pride, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth so necessary to true human dignity.”^{xxxii} Borrowing from David A. Snow, the active and conscious effort of Kameny in creating this frame does indeed imbue it with the qualities of a collection action frame, implying “agency and contention at the level of reality construction.”^{xxxiii}

According to Robert D. Benford, the activity of framing consists of three core tasks: diagnostic, which identifies the problem; prognostic, which creates solutions to the problem; and motivational, which calls for action against the grievance.^{xxxiv} The “Gay is Good” frame meets all of these requirements:

- Diagnostic: Kameny identified the issue of homosexuality as a sickness and sin as a problem for inner perception and outward portrayal.
- Prognostic: The solution, for Kameny, was a complete change in both how homosexuals view their sexuality and how they push for equal rights within society.
- Motivational: Through the adoption of “Gay is Good” as a slogan, Kameny created a call to arms for homophile activists wishing to move past assimilation.

The Genesis of Gay Power

While “Gay is Good” was the pre-Stonewall slogan of affirmation, the “Gay Power” frame came to replace it as gay social movements became increasingly militant after the Stonewall Riots of 1969. Although some within the gay liberation movement have spoken against the homophile organizations of the 1950s and 1960s, most historians recognize the importance of previous protest actions for the creation of “Gay Power”.^{xxxv} As Simon Hall asserts, the “Mattachine Societies in Washington and New York...staged a series of public demonstrations protesting discrimination against homosexuals.”^{xxxvi} Mattachine adopted the civil rights master frame and used the non-violent protest tactics of the African American Civil Rights movement to shed light on homosexuals’ plight in America.^{xxxvii} Moreover, although this tactic and master frame would take a backseat during gay liberation’s heyday, it would soon become the dominant strategy in the years to come. Just as SNCC and CORE

moved away from the civil rights master frame by creating the Black Power frame, the gay liberationists adopted a more militant approach to gay is good, which would eventually turn into “Gay Power”.

“Gay Power” is an overt imitation of the Black Power movement, a term originally coined by Stokely Carmichael, then head of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Carmichael first used the term “Black Power” during a march organized by James Meredith, the first black student at the University of Mississippi. In Carmichael’s speech, given after a protest march on July 28, 1966, he defined the move from a civil rights frame within SNCC to one of Black Power. Carmichael elucidated many topics during this speech, including the need for a black-only, Black Power movement, governed and led by black people. He called for all black activists to come together, “so that we don’t cut each other...and don’t destroy each other but move to a point where we appreciate and love each other.” Most importantly, he called for action; he called for blacks to claim their own power. He called for blacks to “smash any political machine in the country that’s oppressing us and bringing us to our knees.”^{xxxviii}

Dennis Altman writes, “The essential quality of gay liberation...lies in its assertion of gayness, its refusal to feel shame or guilt at being homosexual.”^{xxxix} He continues, writing that “Gay Power” is not equivalent to Black Power, but it does register “substantial conceptual debt.”^{xl} “Gay Power” was tied to the increasing militant aims of 1960s protest groups, especially those aimed at overthrowing the institutions that oppressed them. As with the Black Power movement, gays were now espousing revolutionary rhetoric. From *A Radical Manifesto: The Homophile Movement Must be Radicalized*, activists wrote, “we see the persecution of homosexuality as part of a general attempt to oppress all minorities and keep them powerless. Our fate is linked with these minorities...a common struggle, however, will bring common triumph.”^{xli}

Similar to Carmichael’s call for black-owned businesses and black-led organizations, one of the first known liberation documents made the same claims. Within days of the Stonewall Riots, a flyer began to circulate Greenwich Village. The Homophile Youth Movement urged homosexual men to open their own businesses; boycott establishments run by the Mafia (in reference to Stonewall’s management); and unite to fight New York’s oppressive policies against homosexuals.^{xlii} As with Black Power, the newly radicalized gay liberationists wanted control of their spheres of public and private life.

According to Donn Teal, “Gay Power” was “demanding to be recognized as a powerful minority with just rights that have not been acknowledged; it is an insistence that homosexuality has made its own contribution to civilization...and homosexuality...does nonetheless have unique aspects which demand their own standards of evaluation and their own subculture.”^{xlili} As “Gay Power” continued to infect various social movement organizations, so too was the call for recognition and celebration of gay differences.

Carl Wittman, a member of the Students for a Democratic Society and the Gay Liberation Front, wrote in *A Gay Manifesto*, “We know we are radical, in that we know the system we’re under now is a direct source of oppression, and it’s not a question of getting our share of the pie. The pie is rotten.”^{xliiv} This is just one of many examples of how gay liberationists now spoke in the rhetoric of other New Left organizations; liberationists wanted liberation from oppression and to make revolution against “imperialist Amerika.”^{xliiv} A common concluding statement on GLF literature were the words “All power to the oppressed peoples! Power to all the people!”^{xlivi}

This frame diffusion was common within gay liberation. In addition to their relation with various power movements, gay liberationists also borrowed strategies and tactics from other groups they were involved with. According to Steven Epstein, the antiwar movement provided suspicion of the government; the New left provided an “apocalyptic rhetoric and sense of impending revolution”; the women’s movement elucidated the idea of the sexual as

political; Third world liberation movements reinforced the notion of “resistance to an imperial state”; and the hippies reinforced ideas of mistrusting authority and having fun with your social protests.^{xlvii} Once again using Benford’s core frames, the “Gay Power” frame is easily placed in the following tasks:

- Diagnostic: While “Gay is Good” and instills pride, it does not address the underlying grievances of equality, discrimination, and self-sufficiency within the gay community.
- Prognostic: Gay social groups must be more forceful, calling for equality and a voice. To attain this, gay groups need to embrace liberationist strategies, similar to Black Power groups.
- Motivational: “Gay Power” became a slogan, calling for action within gay organizations. Additionally, “Gay Power” linked the struggles of homosexuals to that of other minority groups within the United States.

Conclusion

Within just a few years of the Stonewall Riots, gay liberation seemed to have lost its rhetorical power and frenzied protest actions. As society slowly started to change its opinion of homosexuality and governmental institutions began to relax or repeal laws of discrimination, the liberation movement lost its steam. The Gay Liberation Front of New York experienced factional discord, as was common within decentralized and participatory revolution groups.^{xlviii} The realization that total structural overthrow of governmental institutions was impossible forced many members to switch their efforts to a more focused, rights-based approach to attaining any kind of success. Upon breaking from the Gay Liberation Front, the newly formed Gay Activists Alliance would, according to its constitution, “focus only on achieving civil rights for gay people” and not on political and societal liberation or associating with other radical militant protest groups.^{xlix} According to Steven Valocchi, there had always existed a tension between the liberation and minority frames since the beginning of gay liberation groups.¹ The idea of remaking society had vanished.

This was not the end though. The strength of the civil rights master frame persisted and is the focus of today’s contemporary movement. Starting with the removal of homosexuality as a sickness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973, a flurry of successes accumulated for gay rights groups: Kathy Kozachenk became the first openly gay elected official, winning a seat on the Ann Arbor City Council; the Democratic Party adopted a plank in support of gay rights during their national convention in 1980; Wisconsin became the first U.S. state to outlaw sexually based discrimination in 1982; Vermont became the first state to legalize Civil Unions in 2000; Sodomy laws were struck down by the US Supreme Court in 2003; and a flurry of anti-discrimination ordinances have been enacted throughout the country.

The tactic of portraying homosexual’s differences from the “straight” majority is gone for the most part and the movement has turned back to a moderate, political campaign aimed at securing anti-discrimination and right-to-marry laws with the established political and power structures of the United States.

If one was to measure success purely on tangible results, the Gay Liberation movement could be deemed an utter failure. They did not change the power structure of America, nor did they overthrow hegemonic institutions. These are the wrong criteria for judgment though. The Gay Liberation movement accomplished the goal of consciousness raising. Prior to 1969, the majority of homosexuals were largely unseen and unable to advocate for themselves. After gay liberation, gays and lesbians were now provided structure and support to become a

vocal majority with political agency. The successes of the past twenty years would not have been possible without the protest actions of the liberation movement.

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- ⁱ Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*, New ed (London ; New York: Verso, 2006), 15.. The "Good Sixties, Bad Sixties" narrative, exemplified in Todd Gitlin's *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, is contested by multiple scholars, including Terence Kissack, "Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York's Gay Liberation Front, 1969–1971," *Radical History Review* 1995, no. 62 (March 20, 1995): 105–134.
- ⁱⁱ David A. Reichard, "'We Can't Hide and They Are Wrong': The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971," *Law & History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 2010): 636.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Similar to many other authors of gay history, the use of identity labels is often messy. An individual or organization's use of a specific term is a very personal decision. Consequently, I have adopted the standard practice of referring to a movement or organization as they would have been during the historical period in which they existed. Hence, for much of the 1960s and 1970s, "gay" or "lesbian and gay" would have been used to refer to a community of homosexual individuals. Furthermore, I refer to the Gay Liberation movement and Gay Rights movements with two very distinct definitions. Gay liberation sought the goal of destroying a system in which gays and lesbians were treated as second-class citizens; on the other hand, the Gay Rights Movement was specifically targeting laws and ordinances, within the political system, which discriminated against gays and lesbians. At no point should my misuse of a term be construed as a lack of sensitivity.
- ^{iv} Various rights group adopted the term "homophile" because it denotes same-sex love and not just sexual acts. The homophile movement wanted to persuade "hetero and homosexuals alike that gay men and women should be considered full participants in the pageant of American civil rights." See John Dennett II. Master, "'A Part of Our Liberation': 'ONE Magazine' and the Cultivation of Gay Liberation, 1953-1963" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of California, Riverside, 2006), 361. For more, see Martin Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10, no. 1 (2001): 78–116, doi:10.1353/sex.2001.0015; James T. Sears, *Behind the Mask of the Mattachine: The Hal Call Chronicles and the Early Movement for Homosexual Emancipation*, Gay and Lesbian Studies (New York, N.Y.: Harrington Park Press, 2006).
- ^v Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 4th ed. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), 161.
- ^{vi} Terrence R. Restivo, "The Building of a New Left Conglomerate in the City of Ann Arbor: VOICE, the Black Action Movement and Human Rights Party (1965-1975)" (M.A., Duquesne University, 2006), 6.
- ^{vii} The Stonewall riots started on June 28, 1969, after a police raid on the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village.
- ^{viii} David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution*, 1st ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 2.

- ^{ix} Simon Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 19, no. 3 (2010): 540, doi:10.1353/sex.2010.0011.
- ^x John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Martin B. Duberman, *Stonewall* (Dutton, 1993); Donn Teal, *The Gay Militants/How Gay Liberation Began in America, 1969-1971*, 1st. pbk. ed (New York N.Y.: St Martins Press, 1995); Carter, *Stonewall*; Elizabeth A. Armstrong and Suzanna M. Crage, "Movements and Memory: The Making of the Stonewall Myth," *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 5 (October 1, 2006): 724–751.
- ^{xi} Meaghan K Nappo, "Not a Quiet Riot Stonewall, and the Creation of Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender Community and Identity Through Public History Techniques," 2010, 11.
- ^{xii} Armstrong and Crage, "Movements and Memory," 725. Marc Stein writes the Stonewall as beginning myth was "popular not only in straight society but also among post-Stonewall gay liberationists and lesbian feminists, whose generational hubris discouraged respectful recognition of predecessors." See Marc Stein, "Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005): 607. Simon Hall writes the new liberationists wanted to demonstrate a break with the past by "denying that lesbian and gay politics even had a past." See Hall, "The American Gay Rights Movement and Patriotic Protest," 546.
- ^{xiii} Ronald J Hunt, *Historical Dictionary of the Gay Liberation Movement: Gay Men and the Quest for Social Justice* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 15–16; Kissack, "Freaking Fag Revolutionaries," 108; Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 1992), 3.
- ^{xiv} Robert B. Marks Ridinger, *The Gay and Lesbian Movement: References and Resources*, Reference Publications on American Social Movements (New York: London: G.K. Hall; Prentice Hall International, 1996), 64.
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