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## Stonewall Riots and Solidarity

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The Stonewall Riots and Social Solidarity Among the Gay Community

The events that occurred outside of the Stonewall Inn in 1969 hold a sort of mythic quality caused by collective effervescence and uncertainty; it is still debated, fifty years later, what actually sparked the initial riot. While it is still contested whether it was a fed-up transgender woman or a lesbian who was beaten up, it is understood that the events of that night in June started out as fairly typical. Police came to the popular gay bar all the time, leading to the natural question of why this night in particular blew up to such mythic proportions. I argue that the Stonewall Riots could not have occurred and held such strong enduring cultural influence without the collective effervescence and solidarity felt among the patrons that frequented the bar. The Stonewall Inn, people will argue, hardly ever had any cisgender women within its walls, even if they were lesbian and masculine in appearance. One of the main suggestions as to what started the riots is that perhaps it was a lesbian who was beaten by the cops and thus sparked outrage. Another theory is that a transgender woman was fed up with being treated inhumanely and argued back with the police. The notion that a woman most likely sparked an event commonly thought of as the key event in gay rights history is monumental in realizing the level

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of community that had to have been felt among the people present that night.

Police raided the Stonewall about once a month through a specific division of the police that always tipped off the owners before they came, in exchange for money. When they came, the cops from the Sixth Precinct almost always just made their presence known, maybe ruffed up a few patrons, or attempted to arrest someone for crossdressing, but they never proved too much of a threat. June 28th, 1969 was different because it was the First Division that raided the club; these cops never gave the Inn a heads-up and most of the officers relied on surprise by not being in uniform. Why the typical notice was not given is still uncertain, but at the moment it was assumed it was because either money had not changed hands on time or perhaps that the Sixth Precinct wanted to show their strength and ask for more money (something that had been anticipated) (Duberman 1993, 128). Later, it appeared that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms discovered that the liquor bottles did not have the proper labels, meaning that they had been bootlegged before being processed by governmental organizations. After keeping an eye on the Inn because of this, the federal government found out that the Inn was being told before the Sixth Precinct came and thus decided to raid the bar on their own terms so no one could be tipped off ahead of time (Duberman 1993, 129). This contingency lined up with outside pressures on the gay community, such as the "sip-in" in Greenwich Village in 1966, the question of legalizing "gay acts" arising in both Canada and South Africa in 1969, and various protests and marches throughout America attempting to bring the closeted community into the light. Tensions between the gay community and the American society at large were already high and would have been in the back of the minds of the politically active people who frequented the Stonewall.

The Stonewall riots were events mythic in their proportions, or at least blown up to appear this way in retrospect. Sewell defines the events as incidents that stand out in history and are discussed at length. He also says, "I insist that social relations are profoundly governed by underlying social and cultural structures and that a proper understanding of the role of events in history must be founded on a concept of structure" (2005, 226). The happenings outside of the Stonewall Inn in June 1969 fit nicely into this definition because they relied heavily on the social and cultural structures both within the local gay community and the gay communities in the larger social sphere. Sewell discusses events in relation to ruptures as well, defining the latter term as "a surprising break with routine practice" (2005, 227). On the night of June 28th, the initial rupture that spurred the next several days into chaos occurred. While the police did raid the Stonewall with more aggression than any previous nights, the



contested moment is the true rupture: the occurrence that made the crowd transform their anger into action.

As mentioned previously, the two primary theories as to what ignited the riot include women. One account of the initial spark includes Tammy Novak, a male-to-female transgender woman who was only partially out at the time. In "The Night They Raided Stonewall," Martin Duberman and Andrew Kopkind wrote that Tammy was pushed by a cop who she then told to stop pushing her, and, "when he didn't, she started swinging. From that point on, so much happened so quickly as to seem simultaneous" (1993, 131). Throughout the article, Duberman and Kopkind mentioned explicitly a few times that Tammy was under the influence of drugs, and her presence at the night club for at least a few hours leads to assumptions of alcoholic intoxication as well. Usually, when the bar was raided by the Sixth Precinct, the cops would show up much earlier in the night, but the First Division arrived at 1:20 A.M., "the height of merriment" (Duberman 1993, 128). This could help explain why Tammy, a seventeen-year-old, could have been so willing and able to punch at law enforcement when she was roughed up while waiting to get in the paddy wagon. Lack of inhibitions also could be a reason why the patrons were able to fight back against the police after the initial rupture.

Jim Fouratt, on his way home from his job, passed the Stonewall Inn and saw commotion. He says that the chaos of the riot began when "a dyke in men's clothing" fought back against the cops trying to arrest her: "...the dyke had to be more butch than the queens. So, when the police moved her into the wagon, she got out the other side and started to rock it" (Duberman 1993, 131). Harry Beard, a waiter at the bar, agrees that it was a lesbian who was the initiator of the chaos. He says that this unnamed woman was arrested because she was dressed as a man, and then gave the police a hard time, resulting in her being hit with a club. Beard remembers that seeing this instance caused the people who had already been kicked out of the bar to become angry and begin to throw things towards law enforcement (Duberman 1993, 132). Beard's account of what sparked the riot is the most well-known and quoted recollection, but why his account is given more weight remains unseen— he says roughly the same thing but with different quotes for different sources, so perhaps he just spoke more about the night than others.

During the 20th century, one could be arrested for not wearing at least three pieces of clothing systemically decided appropriate for one's gender. However, some argue that such a law was never written, and instead police would use unrelated ordinances to justify arresting crossdressers (Ryan 2019). This sort of retroactive justification for arrests or abuse in the moment is something talked at length in David Graeber's *Direct Action* and is discussed as a common occurrence that happens when law enforcement becomes violent without much reason before civilians become





violent (Graeber 2009, 293). This appears to have ensued in both Tammy Novak's and the unnamed lesbian's case, as they may have been rude to police, but non-violent, before the police became harsh with them. While it is still contested what exactly provoked the riot that night, the two leading theories include these women. Stonewall was known as a bar for gay men and gay men only, with only very occasional female visitors: "It wasn't as if the male patrons went out of their way to make [women] feel uncomfortable, but rather that the territory was theirs, not hers" (Duberman 1993, 124). The men who frequented the Stonewall felt a certain unity among their community, enough to create in groups and outgroups within the larger gay community at that time.

Todd J. Ormsbee explains this phenomenon from the beginning of its cyclical history by drawing the connection between the women's rights movement and the gay rights movement. During the 1960s and into the post-Stonewall age, activists were concerned about combining these two movements, particularly from the feminist side. Lesbians were concerned about the lack of attention paid to women's issues in the gay rights movement, and Del Martin, a long-standing and popular activist for lesbian rights at the time, complained publicly of the sexism within gay bars and the gay community writ large (Ormsbee 2010, 220-221). She stated: "'Gay is good,' but not good enough— so long as it is limited to white males only" (Ormsbee 2010, 221). Consequently, people in the lesbian movement felt a stronger connection to other women and began to see gay men as part of sexism right next to straight men, a natural result of the heteropatriarchal state. Being raised in a society that values straight men over other types of people causes one to internalize the same values and could lead to a disassociation with those of that prioritized group and a higher sense of solidarity to the undervalued group one belongs in. In the social hierarchy of mid-1900's Western culture, gay people were low on the totem pole, with gay men slightly higher than gay women. By isolating gay women from the gay movement in general, gay men were able to grasp a little more social capital. Thus, gay men became uncomfortable with allowing lesbians into their movements, and so the system perpetuates itself. This lack of comfort extended into spaces for gay men, including the Stonewall Inn.

Transgender people were regarded differently during this time period as well. Categorically, male-to-female transgender people seemed to fall into a subsection of men: "Gay men didn't have a language yet for talking about transsexuality, sliding uneasily between transvestite, drag, sex change, and she-male... 'A "transsexual" is one who has attempted to legally (and biologically?) change his sex and has no relation to drag"' (Ormsbee 2010, 221-222). There is an interesting dichotomy among men who feel feminine, with lines being drawn

somewhere between men wearing makeup and feminine clothing, drag queens, and people who legally and/or medically change their sex or gender. At the Stonewall Inn, men wearing makeup or feminine clothing seemed acceptable, while male-to-female people were not welcomed enthusiastically, but weren't banned, either. Female-to-male transgender people were also a different category, as well as a few more categories that were marked as male:

There were the "scare drag queens"... "boys who dressed like girls but who you knew were boys." And there were the "flame" (not "drag") queens who wore eye makeup and teased hair but essentially dressed in male clothes... Only a few full-time transvestites, like... and Tammy Novak... were allowed to enter Stonewall in drag. (Tammy sometimes transgressed by dressing as a boy.) (Duberman 1993, 123)

These categories show that male-to-female transgender people are accepted as categorically male, as well as categorically "gay," and thus accepted in the Stonewall Inn. Tammy Novak, a male-to-female transgender person, showcases this by sometimes getting into the Stonewall by dressing as her sex assigned at birth.

The notion of having debatably the event of the gay rights movement spurred by a woman shows immense solidarity among outcasted social groups, such as the gay community in the 1960s. It is worth noting and tying in the idea that Tammy Novak, a male-to-female transgender person, might have been considered categorically male during the time and place she lived. If her experience with the police was indeed the kickoff to the riot, perhaps it would be slightly less remarkable because she may have been considered male. Regardless, bridging the gap between levels of the social hierarchy to the point where gay men become enraged when gay women are oppressed requires solidarity within the community. The existence of the Stonewall Riots depended on the solidarity felt among the broader gay community.



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