

4-28-2015

Gay and Lesbian Culture and Politics

John Hawley

Santa Clara Univeristy, jhawley@scu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (2015). Gay and Lesbian Culture and Politics. In M. Shally-Jensen (Ed.), *American Political Culture: An Encyclopedia* (pp. 469-475). ABC-CLIO Press.

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Gay and Lesbian Culture and Politics

[sidebar] **Pink Dollar.** Also known as pink money or the “Dorothy dollar,” the term gained currency during the 1990s to describe the growing political power of gay contributions to campaigns, as well as the increasingly intentional marketing to gay and lesbian communities by major companies in the United States and Great Britain. In 2012 gay purchasing power was estimated to be greater than \$790 billion (WiG). In late 2013 Credit Suisse announced an LGBT Equality Index, which tracks the financial earnings of companies with pro-gay policies. Some queer activists criticize the wedding of capitalism with the gay and lesbian community as a cooptation resulting in the marginalization of the less affluent among them. Pew research finds that about half the LGBTQ community takes into account a company’s record on gay rights when considering purchasing a product or service (Pew 7) [Further Reading: Badgett, M.V. Lee. *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.]

[sidebar] **Ellen DeGeneres.** In a 2013 survey of 1197 LGBT Americans, Ellen ranked second (Barack Obama was first) as the most important public figure in advancing LGBT rights (Pew 6). Born in 1958 and married to Portia de Rossi since 2008, she is a comedian and moderator of her eponymous television show since 2003. She starred in the sitcom *Ellen* from 1994 to 1998, where the most famous episode featured her kissing a female character, and subsequently coming out of the closet. She has received 13 Emmys. [Further Reading: DeGeneres, Ellen. *The Funny Thing Is....*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004.]

[sidebar] **Human Rights Campaign.** Founded in 1980 and now claiming over one and a half million members and supporters, this is the largest LGBT equality-rights political lobby and advocacy group. In 1993 it began the National Coming Out day (October 11). Elizabeth Birch quadrupled membership during her tenure (1995-2004). Featured speakers at its annual fundraiser in Washington DC have included Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, Maya Angelou, Kweisi Mfume, Joseph Lieberman, Hillary Clinton, Richard Gephardt, John Lewis, Rosie O’Donnell, Nancy Pelosi, Tim Gunn, Suze Orman, Sally Field, Cory Booker, Tammy Baldwin, and Betty DeGeneres. [Further Reading: Gates, Gary J. and Jason Ost. *Gay & Lesbian Atlas*. Urban Institute Press, 2004]

[sidebar] **Barney Frank.** Born in 1940 and a member of the House of Representatives from Massachusetts from 1981 to 2013, Frank received three degrees from Harvard. In 2012 he married Jim Ready. As chair of the House Financial Services Committee from 2007 to 2011 he was co-sponsor a reform of the U.S. financial industry following the crash of 2008. He is still considered the most famous gay politician, having come out of the closet in 1987—the first member of Congress to do so. He was regularly re-elected after that. [Further Reading: Weisberg, Stuart *Barney Frank: The Story of America's Only Left-handed, Gay, Jewish Congressman*, University of Massachusetts Press (2009)]

As laws change and we move several generations away from the times of greatest struggle, the atmosphere that created the contemporary scene for gay and lesbian citizens, their culture and politics, becomes increasingly remote and potentially forgotten. As recent historians have recalled, though, “This was a population too shy and fearful to even raise its hand, a group of people who had to start at zero in order to create their place in the nation’s culture,” –an “invisible people” (Clendinen, 11). The movement for gay and lesbian rights in the United States, considered by many to have originated with the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York on June 28, 1969, had taken a long time to reach that night’s critical mass of public resistance among gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals against institutional prejudice. The Society for Human Rights, founded in 1924 in Chicago, was the first recognized gay rights organization in the United States, and activists went on to form the Mattachine Society in 1950 in Los Angeles and the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955 in San Francisco. Coinciding with these early stirrings of resistance during the McCarthy era in the early ‘50s, hundreds of those considered to be homosexual were denied employment from the federal government and discharged from the military services. Many justified this bias by making reference to the American Psychiatric Association’s 1952 inclusion of homosexuality in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* as a mental disorder. In 1959 gays and transgender people protested in Los Angeles, and in 1966 drag queens, hustlers, and transvestites rioted outside Compton’s Cafeteria in San Francisco when police began arresting transvestites. Nonetheless, the “riots” that went on for five days at Stonewall received greater attention and are now commemorated throughout the United States in the month of June in a series of Gay Pride parades and other events. In 1973 homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders in the DSM, and the pace of gay, lesbian, transgender, as well as bisexual and queer rights accelerated.

Recently, rapid changes are influencing the evolution of the culture and politics of gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals in the U.S. Where these developments lead remains to be seen, but some indication of trends can be seen in *A Survey of LGBT Americans: Attitudes, Experiences and Values in Changing Times*, issued in the summer of 2013 by the Pew Research Center. Ninety-two percent of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender adults reported that they thought American society had grown more accepting of them in recent years, and that they expected that trend to continue in the near future. Countering this general optimism are their reports of being the butt of jokes or slurs (58%), rejection by families or friends (39%), physical attacks (30%), a general sense of unwelcome in places of worship (29%), and mistreatment by employers (21%). In this age of greater openness and apparent acceptance of gays and lesbians, it may be surprising to learn that only 56% of those questioned reported that they had told their mother of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and only 39% had told their father. This silence would seem to suggest that a great many gay, lesbian, and queer individuals still receive strong signals from American society that it is really not okay to be who they are. Their sense that they may not be like the majority of their friends came at about the age of 12, and became crystallized for most by age 17. Those who told a friend or family member first did so, on the average, at the age of 20. Beyond these characteristics, the Pew survey found their respondents to be:

more liberal, more Democratic, less religious, less happy with their lives, and more satisfied with the general direction of the country. On average, they are younger than the general public. Their family incomes are lower, which may be related to their relative youth and the smaller size of their households. They are also more likely to perceive

discrimination not just against themselves but also against other groups with a legacy of discrimination. (Pew 1-2)

While more report that they are, indeed, less happy with their lives, “only a small fraction of all groups describe their sexual orientation or gender identity as a negative factor” (Pew 3).

Legislation and the Legal System

Recognizing the importance of the courts as battlegrounds for civil rights, lawyers and others founded a number of organizations that initiated claims or filed *amicus* briefs in those filed by others. The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund was established in 1973, the National Gay Task Force also in 1973 (which became the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in 1985), and in 1984 the American Civil Liberties Union formed the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project. In 1977 the National Center for Lesbian Rights was established. Similar organizations followed: Gay Rights Advocates in California in the same year, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders in 1978 in Boston, and in 1980 the Human Rights Campaign, which supports candidates for political office.

State and federal laws gradually began to reflect the changes slowly taking place in the popular consensus in the nation. The courts became a decisive battle ground, as they had in other civil rights causes, with definitely mixed results. In 1967 the Supreme Court upheld laws banning the admission of homosexuals into the U.S., but in 1969 the Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia (in *Norton v. Macy*) ruled that private consensual sexual acts could not in themselves be cause for the firing of civil servants. Challenges were brought to sodomy laws; a few were successful but more were not so. In 1976 and in 1986 (in *Bowers v. Hardwick*) the Supreme Court affirmed two of the negative decisions. In 1996 (in *Romer v. Evans*) the Supreme Court ruled that the needs of public morality could not justify discrimination, and in 2003 (in *Lawrence v. Texas*) it overturned its 1986 decision, thereby voiding all remaining state anti-sodomy laws.

Labor law became a contentious issue, as it had in other civil rights struggles. It is currently legal in over half the states to fire someone because of his or her sexual orientation, and in two-thirds of the states it's legal to fire someone because of their gender identity. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would protect gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals from being fired for their sexual orientation or gender, has languished in Congress for over 40 years. In 1996 it very narrowly failed in the Senate. In 2007 a similar bill passed in the House with 35 Republicans joining 200 Democrats, but not in the Senate. In 2013, it passed in the Senate by a wide margin (64 to 32), but the House leader, a Republican, refused to allow a vote on the issue.

Military Service

Gays and lesbians in the military services increasingly stood up for their rights. In the 1970s Leonard Matlovich became one of the best known gay men in the United States (and was the cover of *Time* magazine) by coming out of the closet and trying to remain in the Air Force. The so-called “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” (DADT) policy on gays serving in the military came into effect in February of 1994, and was repealed in September of 2011. The policy barred openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual persons from serving in the military, and supposedly barred harassment

or discrimination against closeted homosexuals and bisexuals who were currently serving in the armed services. When the latter provision continued to be violated, the policy became “don’t ask, don’t tell, don’t pursue, don’t harass.” In repealing this policy, the United States joined the other 44 countries that allowed openly gay and lesbian servicemen-and-women.

Marriage

Pew research reports that 66% percent of lesbians are in a committed relationship, and that 40% of gay men are (Pew 5). Marriage continues to be an important area of contestation in the United States, though the change in public attitudes is striking. In 2003, 32% of those questioned favored legal marriage for gays and lesbians; in 2013 that figure had risen to 51% (Pew 2). In 1996 the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was passed, a law barring the federal government from recognizing same-sex marriages legalized by the states. Since then, thirty-one U.S. state constitutional amendments banning legal recognition of same-sex unions had been adopted. Prior to 2004, same-sex civil marriage was not recognized in any state, but since then 14 states plus the District of Columbia had legalized it. Five had done so by court decision (California, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, and New Jersey), seven had done so by state legislature (Delaware, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Illinois), three by popular vote (Maine, Maryland, and Washington). Thirty-four states ban same-sex marriage (27 by constitutional amendment and state law; three by constitutional amendment only; and four by state law only). New Mexico currently has no law banning or legalizing same-sex marriage, but in 2013 six counties are issuing licenses for such marriages. In June of 2013 the Supreme Court, in a 5 to 4 ruling, declared DOMA to be unconstitutional. Writing for the majority (which also included Breyer, Kagan, Ginsburg, and Sotomayor), Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote that

The federal statute is invalid, for no legitimate purpose overcomes the purpose and effect to disparage and to injure those whom the State, by its marriage laws, sought to protect in personhood and dignity. By seeking to displace this protection and treating those persons as living in marriages less respected than others, the federal statute is in violation of the Fifth Amendment. (Huffington Post)

In August of that year, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg became the first justice to officiate at the wedding of a gay couple. Since then, retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, appointed to the court by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, officiated at the Supreme Court building at the wedding of two men, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg also did so.

The repeal of DOMA had an immediate effect on U.S. immigration laws pertaining to same-sex couples couples in which one member does not have U.S. citizenship. Janet Napolitano, then Director of Homeland Security, in July of 2013 issued a protocol as follows: “I have directed U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to review immigration visa petitions filed on behalf of a same-sex spouse in the same manner as those filed on behalf of an opposite-sex spouse.”

The Arts

The author of a recent study of the arts in American life notes that in the mid-twentieth century “the gay presence was sufficient to disturb many observers, who imagined a vast homintern—a homosexual international conspiracy in the arts parallel to the Comintern, or Communist

International, in politics” (Sherry, 1). Much of the gayness was only whispered about. Revisionist history has since revealed just how pink the whole thing really was—and continues to be. Now, though, a younger generation is growing up with groundbreaking shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk* barely remembered, and *Will and Grace* now available all day long in the same way that *I Love Lucy* had been not long ago. We’re not quite there yet, but we seem not far from the day when being gay or lesbian means little more in most adolescent conversations than expressing a preference for cheddar cheese rather than swiss. Television and film have brought this about, to a great deal. This has been accompanied, in a more troubled way, by the music industry. Many rock stars have supported gay and lesbian rights; some have come out as gay or lesbian. Even a few hip-hop artists, in what remains one of the few homophobic artistic forms in America, have taken a stand against such discrimination.

Religion

Institutional religion is problematic in the lives of the majority of gays and lesbians. According to Pew research, two-thirds of the public that attends church weekly believe that homosexuality should be discouraged and that it conflicts with their religious beliefs (Pew 7). In turn, 84% of gays and lesbians describe the Muslim religion as unfriendly to them, 83% feel that way about the Mormon Church, 79% about the Catholic Church, and 73% about evangelical churches. Fewer than half of those surveyed had negative experiences with the Jewish religion and with mainline Protestant churches (Pew 6). Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, whereas 20% of the public at-large has no religious affiliation, among gays and lesbians that percentage rises to 48%. Many religiously affiliated colleges and universities, though, are becoming more welcoming to LGBT students.

AIDS and Health Issues

With the arrival of anti-retroviral drugs in 1995 the scourge of an AIDS diagnosis being equivalent to a death sentence has somewhat dissipated, replaced by a recognition that those infected with HIV (over 1.1 million, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) are more likely going to live into old age, provided they maintain a strict pharmaceutical regime, which can be very expensive. This has changed the tone in gay culture from one of panic and despair—with either an apocalyptically inspired abandon of proper caution in sexual activity, or a monkish avoidance of sexual activity altogether—to what approaches a willful forgetting of the epidemic, at least among the younger generations. Still, around 50,000 individuals are newly infected each year, and about 18% of those currently infected are not aware of their condition (Centers, 1).

Politics

Pew reports that one-third of the gay and lesbian community has donated money to politicians who support their rights (Pew 7). Democrats are favored overwhelmingly. Pew found that the general consensus was that the Democratic party was friendly to LGBT causes (57%), but only 4% thought that the Republican party could be seen that way. About 49% percent of the general public leans Democratic, but 79% of lesbians and gays do (Pew 6). They are pro-big government, pro-gun control, and pro-immigrant.

Meanwhile, the face of Congress is slowly changing. *The New York Times* reports that

For decades, the words “gay” and “Congress” were usually seen together only in stories of scandal and shame: an arrest after an illicit proposition in an airport bathroom, accusation of trawling for sex on a phone service. When Gerry E. Studds came out 30 years ago, the first congressman to do so, it was only after an affair with a 17-year-old Congressional page was revealed. (Peters)

The 113th Congress had six openly gay or bisexual members in the House, and the Senate has its first lesbian, Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin. These are very small numbers, but as one of the congressmen noted, “With six of us it’s harder to keep track. And it’s always going to be assumed that there are gays and lesbians in the room” (Peters).

“The Community”

As with any subculture, that of the gays and lesbians operated for many years with a general strategy that might be described as strategic essentialism: obviously gays and lesbians did not think like each other, nor within those two groups was there ever a monolithic viewpoint on most issues. Nonetheless, for much the same reason that ghettos arose, such as the Castro district in San Francisco, Boystown in Chicago, or the Christopher St./Chelsea areas of New York, there was a felt need for strength in numbers, a coming together for political causes that took precedence over less pressing squabbles. The threat of AIDS had a mixed effect—underscoring the immediate need for camaraderie, but also, through deaths of prominent gay figures and the overall seriousness of the crisis, decimating the cultural characteristics of these ghettos that had marginalized gays (and to a perhaps less acknowledged degree, lesbians) and simultaneously given them a shared identity.

With the greater visibility of gays in American culture and with a growing acceptance of rights, such as marriage, that had heretofore been denied them, gays and lesbians are becoming fully assimilated *as gays and lesbians*—i.e., they had in earlier decades been accepted as heterosexuals who just didn’t marry, etc., and as long as they kept their mouths shut and kept to themselves in private playgrounds, they could be tolerated. With the greater assimilation there is something of a crisis of identity among formerly ghettoized communities. What need is there for a Castro district anymore? To many, these enclaves seem like souvenirs of a bygone era and seem to others to have evolved into something akin to sexualized shopping malls. In the Pew survey half the respondents thought that joining mainstream society and participating in its institutions was the best way to achieve equality, while the other half of respondents thought such equality could and should be achieved while maintaining a distinctive culture and way of life (Pew 7). In this regard, then, gay and lesbian culture mirrors that of other minorities, including those who worry that interracial or interreligious marriage may “dilute” the purity of their group identity.

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John C. Hawley is Professor of English at Santa Clara University. He is the editor of the three-volume *LGBTQ America Today* (ABC-CLIO, 2009) and *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Essays* (SUNY, 2001), among others.