

US: From Stonewall to Black Lives Matter

Thinking about Rebellion

Saturday 1 August 2020, by [O'BRIEN Keegan](#) (Date first published: 27 July 2020).

The fifty-first anniversary of the Stonewall Riots that gave birth to the modern LGBT movement is currently being marked by the most significant rebellion against racism and police violence in more than half a century.

All of this is unfolding in a context where from the legalization of marriage equality to recent inclusion of LGBTQ people in workplace non-discrimination protections, laws, public policy, and mainstream opinion have shifted decisively in favor of LGBTQ equality and cultural visibility, and representation of trans and queer people has expanded wider than at any other time period in American history.

On the other hand, the Trump administration has spent its first term in office carrying out an aggressive barrage of attacks that threaten to turn back the clock and undermine the very same rights that have been won through struggle and by whipping up greater hatred and suspicion that has fueled his bigoted right-wing base of support.

Given this contradictory landscape, it's useful to evaluate the state of LGBTQ life and politics under Trump, the significance of the current anti-racist rebellion unfolding across the country and its implications for the trans and queer movement, and the radical legacy of Stonewall Rebellion and the Gay Liberation Movement and the lessons it holds for the fight for trans and queer liberation today.

THE STATE OF LGBTQ LIFE TODAY

From attacks against trans people to the defense of "religious liberties," the Trump administration has made it a point to target the most oppressed and vulnerable, and stand up for bigotry and discrimination. Below is a brief overview of the Trump Administration's most egregious attacks on trans and queer people,

- In the summer of 2017, in a series of classic Trump tweets, the president announced that he would be reinstating the military's ban on transgender people serving in the military, bogusly claiming the military couldn't afford the high rate of health care costs.
- In 2017 Education Secretary Betsy DeVos rescinded Obama-era guidelines requiring schools provide basic civil rights protections to transgender students. In the context of a school system where trans students are regularly bullied and harassed and already experience disproportionately higher levels of depression and suicide, this decision will have extremely harmful consequences
- Trump has continued to stack the federal court system with judicial nominees who are openly and vehemently opposed to LGBTQ rights
- The Justice Department rescinded an Obama-era federal memo declaring trans people are protected under civil rights laws and has come out in support of anti-trans "bathroom bill" legislation. The bigoted right has taken this as a green light to go on the offensive, using the

guise of “religious liberties” and “bathroom bills” to chip away at established civil rights protections across the country at the local, state and federal level.

- The administration has provided a set of “religious liberties” guidelines to federal agencies asking them to respect “religious-liberty protections” in all levels of the federal government. The Department of Health and Human Services also created a new agency, the “Division of Consciousness and Religious Freedom” to ensure that the “religious liberties” of providers aren’t violated.
- Without any explanation, the administration fired the entire Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS in December — and continues its refusal to recognize LGBTQ Pride Month in June.
- It allowed emergency shelters to deny housing to transgender and gender non-conforming people. Despite the fact that LGBTQ people are significantly more likely to experience homelessness in their lives, HUD Secretary Ben Carson has proposed a rule to permit emergency shelters to deny access or otherwise discriminate against transgender and gender nonconforming people who are homeless.
- It supported employment discrimination against LGBTQ people by submitting amicus briefs to the U.S. Supreme Court advocating against LGBTQ people’s inclusion in workplace non-discrimination policies and publicly coming out against the Equality Act.
- It instituted changes to the Affordable Care Act (ACA) by removing explicit protections for LGBTQ people in healthcare programs by excluding LGBTQ people from protections from discrimination based on sex stereotyping and gender identity. In a healthcare system already mired with transphobia and homophobia, this will disproportionately have the most serve impact on working class and poor trans and queer people, particularly people of color.

RACE, CLASS AND LGBTQ OPPRESSION

Compounded with broader attacks against working class and oppressed people, the situation for the most vulnerable queer and trans folks, particularly those at the intersections of race, class, gender and sexual oppression, remains extremely precarious and approaching a state of social crisis.

Nothing demonstrates this more starkly than the level of violence endured by trans women of color. The stories of Selena Reyes-Hernandez and Dominique Rem’mie Fells, who were murdered this month, are only the most recent manifestations of this. In 2017, twenty-eight transgender people, overwhelmingly trans women of color, were killed as a result of hate motivated attacks. Trans women of color make up sixty-seven percent of homicides against the LGBTQ community and Black trans women have a life expectancy rate of thirty-five years.

As a report detailing the simultaneous layers of structural oppression and their effects explains,

While the details of these cases differ, it is clear that fatal violence disproportionately affects transgender women of color, and that the intersections of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia conspire to deprive them of employment, housing, health care and other necessities, barriers that make them vulnerable.

The picture for young queer people, especially trans youth, is equally disturbing. Although schools should be a safe place for students from the oppression and discrimination of society, too often they are not.

In a recent study, eighty-two percent of trans youth reported feeling unsafe at school, forty-four percent experienced physical abuse, and sixty-seven percent were bullied by their peers. The emotional and psychological toll social and family rejection can take on LGBTQ youth can be traumatizing and have dangerous consequences. Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth contemplate suicide at almost three times the rate of their straight peers, and more than forty percent of

transgender adults report having attempted suicide.

Of the more than 1.7 million homeless youth in the U.S., forty percent identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, and almost all report rejection from family, community and/or peers as the primary reason for being forced onto the streets.

In the era of mass incarceration and the New Jim Crow, it is no surprise that a criminal legal system designed to target low-income Black, Latino, and immigrant communities and poor working class people, disproportionately affects those same populations in the [LGBTQ](#) community.

With the advent of “quality of life” laws in the 1990s, many cities saw an increase in arrests for panhandling, loitering, and other petty crimes, in an effort to “get tough” and “crack down” on crimes that politicians and law enforcement argued worsened the “quality of life” and led to more severe forms of criminal behavior. Rather than making communities safer, these get-tough measures function to criminalize the symptoms of capitalist exploitation and oppression and result in more people being swept into the criminal legal system for nonviolent offenses and petty infractions.

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Poor and homeless LGBTQ youth, particularly trans women of color, who are pushed into underground economies, such as sex work or drug dealing for survival purposes, are most targeted by broken-windows policing and are disproportionately brutalized by police, penalized, and incarcerated as a result. Once swept into the system, already marked by multiple racialized, gendered, and classed narratives of social deviance and abnormality—they face enormous levels of racist, homophobic, and transphobic discrimination and bias at the hands of police, lawyers, probation officers, and judges.

Nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the story of Layleen Polanco. Layleen was a twenty-seven year old Afro-Latinx trans woman who died at Rikers Island after staff laughed and failed to provide her with medical care that could have saved her life after an epileptic seizure. Layleen was initially arrested for a misdemeanor assault charge, then held on prior drug and sex work charges. Unable to afford \$500 bail, Layleen was detained in solitary confinement where she was kept for seventeen hours a day.

Layleen’s story illustrates the barbarity of the criminal legal system and the ways racism, transmisogyny and the criminalization of poverty can intersect with lethal consequences for trans women of color.

On top of this, social service organizations like the Ali Forney Center the Marsha P. Johnston Institute and many others on the frontlines of providing crucial and life-saving services to vulnerable and at-risk LGBTQ youth and trans and queer people of color, already underfunded and lacking adequate resources to tackle the array of social problems at hand, face a bipartisan austerity regime that will make life even harder for those that need the most support.

In this context, it’s no exaggeration to say that the Trump administration and the Religious Right have blood on their hands. These aren’t simply abstract policy debates but real attacks against LGBTQ people that jeopardize the victories our side has fought for and won, attempt to re-legitimize a climate of homophobia and transphobia, and have damaging material impacts, especially on the lives of the most vulnerable queer and trans people.

The Trump regime is waging an offensive that calls for an all-out response. Instead, we’ve been left

with a response from established LGBT organizations and the Democratic Party that has been underwhelming or passive at best to outright complicit at worst.

Mainstream LGBT groups have continued to place all their faith, and millions of dollars, in the Democratic Party, pursuing a strategy of lobbying and campaigning for “pro-equality” candidates with little results. This can be seen most recently in the Democratic Party establishment’s successful attempt to crush the insurgent social-democratic campaign of Bernie Sanders, a long time proponent of LGBTQ equality, in favor of probably the most underwhelming and pathetic presidential candidate in modern American history; Joe Biden.

Although Democrats like to posture as “allies” of LGBT communities today, it was only a decade ago when the vast majority of Democratic politicians completely opposed gay marriage and refused to even utter the word transgender. Even now, the shift in rhetoric from mainstream Democrats has been a result of mass pressure and struggle from below.

Even worse, Democratic politicians, including so-called “progressives” like NYC Mayor Bill DeBlasio, continually support austerity measures alongside increased spending on policing and incarceration, which disproportionately harm poor trans and queer folks, particularly people of color.

THE BIRTH OF AN UPRISING AND THE FIGHT FOR BLACK TRANS LIVES

As has historically been the case, from the era of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights and Black Power Movement; the Black liberation struggle is once again ripping open the Pandora’s box of American capitalism and exposing the brutal, sick and twisted priorities of the so called “greatest democracy” in the modern world. George Floyd’s cry of, “I can’t breathe!” caught on camera as a white police officer shoved his knee into Floyd’s neck, ultimately murdering him, has laid bare the hideous underbelly of America racism.

What the police murder of George Floyd has unleashed cannot be reduced to just a wave of protests against an isolated incident, or senseless “violence” and “looting,” as some in the media and political class have tried to do. What began in Minneapolis and has spread to cities across the country and around the world can only be described as a rebellion, spearheaded by Black workers and youth on a scale and magnitude far wider and deeper than what we saw in Ferguson or Baltimore.

This is a collective uprising, a national working-class rebellion catalyzed by yet another police murder, but in response to something much deeper; a cataclysmic failure of the system to offer even the most basic standard of living or sense of dignity to the vast majority of working class and poor people—a reality most acutely and disproportionately experienced by Black and Brown people.

The coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated the economic devastation in urban Black communities. Decades of government neglect and financial disinvestment, extreme poverty, depression levels of unemployment, hyper segregation, all backed up and enforced by a brutal militarized police state that has been able to terrorize and murder Black and Brown people, and even many working class and poor whites, with complete and total impunity—these are the ingredients of the unfolding rebellion in the Black America that has inspired an entire generation.

The unfolding Black Lives Matter rebellion has given rise to a historic breakthrough and development in the struggle for trans and queer liberation. On Sunday, June 14th, in Brooklyn, NY, history was made as tens of thousands of people turned out to demand in unequivocal terms: Black Trans Lives Matter. Across the sea of people with homemade signs and from speakers and organizers at the front of the rally, demonstrators highlighted the resiliency and power of Black trans activism and called attention to the range of issues effecting trans people of color—from

housing and homelessness, to disproportionate rates of violence, police brutality and incarceration, to barriers in healthcare access to the exclusion of trans people from the mainstream gay movement. The march was very likely the largest single demonstration for trans rights, and Black trans lives in particular, in U.S. history.

It's clear that a profound shift is taking place: a rising generation of multi-racial, working class trans and queer radicals are emerging, inspired by the militancy of Black Lives Matter and the resistance to Trump, fed up with and disconnected from the corporatization and white-washing of mainstream gay rights organizations, led by trans and queer people of color, demanding a new kind of queer movement.

It is a movement foregrounding the connections between race, class, gender and sexuality and rooted in an uncompromising solidarity. A spirit of solidarity that goes beyond empty words and hollow gestures. A solidarity grounded in actually standing and fighting alongside the most oppressed, and rooted in centering the voices and experiences of those who've historically been marginalized and left behind, specifically trans women of color, by a movement leadership that's been so wealthy, so white, so cis and so enmeshed with the economic and political establishment that they've become wholly disconnected from the lived experiences of ordinary LGBTQ people.

Sex wasn't the only thing that could get you in trouble—clothes could, too, and that could be a problem for anyone brave enough to defy gender norms

This dynamic of the Black movement inspiring deeper and broader waves of struggle is not new. In the 1960s and 70s, the struggle of African-Americans to dismantle racial apartheid gave rise to a generation of social movements and political dissent that transformed American society on a mass scale, from the Vietnam Anti-War Movement, to the Chicano and Women's Liberation movement and eventually into the LGBT world.

THE STONEWALL REBELLION

While LGBTQ political organizing took place before Stonewall, including uprising against police harassment, like the 1966 Compton Cafeteria Riots in San Francisco, most of the work was underground, tepid, and heavily influenced by the conservative McCarthyist atmosphere of 1950s and early 1960s. That started to change, however, as the Civil Rights Movement unfolded and many young gay activists became inspired by African-Americans who defied police terror and racist oppression.

Early gay rights organizations, such as New York's Mattachine Society and the San Francisco based Society for Individual Rights, began to take a more militant and unapologetic turn. Frank Kameny, an early gay activist declared, "not only is homosexuality not immoral, but homosexual acts engaged in by consenting adults are moral, right, good, and desirable, both for individual participants and society." Gay rights groups began organizing public demonstrations and "sip-ins" to demand the decriminalization of homosexuality and an end to anti-gay harassment at bars.

In May 1969, a young gay leftist in San Francisco named Carl Wittman penned "[A Gay Manifesto](#)," an essay that would soon become a defining document in the gay liberation movement. Wittman's words illustrate the radicalization taking place among young, gay militants and highlights the connections activists were beginning to make between homophobia, state repression and police violence. His statement was a harbinger of things to come:

Straight cops patrol us, straight legislators govern us, straight employers keep us in line, straight money exploits us. We have pretended that everything is OK, because we

haven't been able to see how change it—we've been afraid.

In the past year there has been an awakening of gay liberation. How it began we don't know; maybe we were inspired by black people and their freedom movement...

Where once there was frustration, alienation, and cynicism, there are new characteristics among us. And as we recall all the self-censorship and repression for so many years, a reservoir of tears pours out of our eyes. We are full of love for each other and are showing it; we are full of anger at what has been done to us. And we are euphoric, high, with the initial flourish of a movement.

The Stonewall Inn was one of New York City's most popular gay bars in the 1960s. Sitting at the crossroads of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood known for its bohemian lifestyle, and just steps away from the the Village Voice office, the Stonewall was dark and had two bars, a jukebox, and the only floor for dancing in the whole city. The Stonewall became an epicenter for the gay world of New York, especially its most marginal members, and regularly drew an electric crowd of cruising gay men, drag queens, street kids, and some lesbians.

At the beginning of the decade, laws across the US were more repressive against homosexuals than any of the Soviet regimes the US criticized. A consenting adult who was caught having sex with another person of the same sex could face decades or even life in prison, or could be confined to an insane asylum and given electroshock therapy, castrated, or lobotomized. Adults who were charged with a sex offense could lose their professional license and were often terminated from their jobs and barred from future employment.

Sex wasn't the only thing that could get you in trouble—clothes could, too, and that could be a problem for anyone brave enough to defy gender norms. Transgender people, cross-dressers, and drag and street queens were targeted and criminalized by the state. Wearing more than three items of clothing in New York City that did not "match" your assigned gender was [illegal and could result in arrest](#) and imprisonment. Across the nation, gendered clothing laws that [began to appear in the mid-19th century stayed on the books for decades](#), making variant gender expressions illegal.

While bars provided a place for gay people to meet one another and socialize in a repressive society, it also made them a target for police. Late on a Friday night in June 1969, police busted into the Stonewall, demanding that all patrons line up and show their IDs and planning to arrest bar employees, cross-dressers, and those without proper identification.

That night the police were more aggressive than normal. They tore apart the bar, smashed the furniture, and were physically aggressive with patrons who talked back and mouthed off. Unlike previous raids that came early in the night, police shut the Stonewall during peak hours. Whereas normally patrons would disperse after being kicked out, knowing they could return later, this time they began to gather outside the bar. The crowd of a few dozen eventually swelled to hundreds. Thousands of gay residents poured into the streets.

The uprising was multiracial, diverse, and reflected a broad spectrum of the LGBTQ community. Many eyewitnesses commented specifically on the important role played that night by the most marginalized sections of the community—street kids, trans women, and queer youth of color.

But when the police wagons arrived, the mood changed. Angry onlookers began throwing coins at police, and then moved on to bottles, cobblestones, and trash cans. A full-fledged riot soon broke out.

Later that night, the riot squad arrived, and a night-long chase between gay and trans protesters and police ensued. Expecting to easily disperse the crowd of people society had labeled “sissies” and “faggots” and stereotypically viewed as weak, the police were completely caught off guard when the protesters fought back. Pioneering transgender activist [Sylvia Rivera](#) was a part of Friday night’s uprising, which she would later describe as a turning point in her life. When a friend tried to convince her to leave, [she said](#), “Are you nuts?! I’m not missing a minute of this—it’s the revolution!”

THE GAY LIBERATION MOVEMENT

Stonewall marked a sharp break from the past and a qualitative turning point in the LGBTQ movement—not only because of the continuous rioting in the streets against police, but because activists were able to seize the moment and give an organized expression to the spontaneous uprising that encapsulated the militancy of the era. While the homophile movement made steady, if limited, progress throughout the 1950s and ’60s and laid the basis for the gay liberation movement, Stonewall broke the dam of political and social isolation and catapulted the gay movement out from the margins and into the open.

Brown and other radicals put together a flyer with the heading “GAY POWER” that called for a “Homosexual Liberation Meeting” and concluded by saying “No one is free until everyone is free!”

Activists didn’t waste a minute. Before the riots even finished, homophile militants created a flyer and distributed it to thousands of Village residents. It read, “Do you think homosexuals are revolting? You bet your sweet ass we are!” and described the Stonewall Rebellion as “The hairpin drop heard around the world.”

Michael Brown, a gay socialist involved in the New Left who was at Stonewall and helped pass out flyers, reached out to the Mattachine Society after the first night of rioting in the hopes of calling for an organizing meeting to tap into the new momentum. Brown’s proposal wasn’t viewed warmly by everyone in Mattachine. Older activists were critical of the riots and didn’t want to disrupt the group’s relationship with the political establishment.

Brown and other radicals put together a flyer with the heading “GAY POWER” that called for a “Homosexual Liberation Meeting” and concluded by saying “No one is free until everyone is free!” The first meeting was held two weeks after the riots and drew forty people. It was here that activists first chose the name the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), modeled on Vietnam’s National Liberation Front, the guerrilla communist movement fighting against the United States.

In a statement for a radical newspaper called *The Rat*, GLF defined their mission this way:

We are a revolutionary homosexual group of men and women formed with the realization that complete sexual liberation for all people cannot come about unless existing social institutions are abolished. We reject society’s attempt to impose sexual roles and definitions of our nature... Babylon has forced us to commit ourselves to one thing... revolution.

When asked what made them revolutionaries, they replied: “We identify ourselves with all the oppressed: the Vietnamese struggle, the third world, the blacks, the workers... all those oppressed by this rotten, dirty, vile, fucked up capitalist conspiracy.”

GLF chapters quickly spread across the country, organizing dances to raise money and create spaces for gay people to meet one another outside of mafia-controlled bars. In the fall of 1969, the GLF created its own newspaper, “Come Out!,” which became a key way to disseminate ideas and

movement information. *Gay Power* and *Gay* also premiered that year and each sold over 25,000 copies per issue.

The GLF organized protests and direct actions to pressure politicians to support gay rights and established community service programs to provide food and social services to LGBTQ street youth. GLF members took their political education seriously and sought to develop a Marxist analysis of gay oppression.

From the beginning, GLF members debated whether the group should focus exclusively on gay issues or connect itself with other struggles on the Left. This led to a split, with some activists leaving to establish a single-issue organization called the “Gay Activists Alliance (GAA),” which defined itself as a group “exclusively devoted to the liberation of homosexuals and avoids involvement in any program of action not obviously relevant to homosexuals.”

The GAA began to organize public protests, referred to as “zaps.” It disrupted meetings with the mayor and city council representatives in an attempt to pressure them to end job discrimination and police harassment against gays and lesbians.

This statement from Arthur Evans, a prominent member of GAA, sums up the group’s approach—and contrasts sharply with the “don’t rock the boat” strategy pursued by established LGBTQ organizations today. Evans said:

We decided that people on the other side of the power structure were going to have the same thing happen to them. The wall that they had built protecting themselves from the personal consequences of their political decisions was going to be torn down... That meant in effect that we were going to disrupt Mayor Lindsey’s personal life... as a result of the political consequences of his administration.

The GLF and GAA collaborated on many projects, including the first annual march commemorating the Stonewall Rebellion, which took place in New York City and drew ten thousand people. The march quickly expanded to dozens of cities across the country and involved over five hundred thousand people.

One agenda item all gay liberationists shared was the emphasis on coming out publicly. Although coming out carried very real risks, it was also a cathartic experience that shed the shame and humiliation associated with living life in the closet and provided people with a newfound sense of pride and self-confidence.

It also, as gay historian [John D’Emilo](#) points out, “provided gay liberationists with an army of permanent enlistees.” By coming out, the movement gained people who became personally invested in the future of the struggle and served as a pole of attraction to wider layers of people and new recruits. As gays and lesbians came out to friends, family, and coworkers, it made homosexuality seem more like a “normal” part of the social fabric and give the movement new leverage in pushing for social change in the following decades.

TRANSPHOBIA AND THE GAY LEFT

However, like all movements gay liberation contained political contradictions and internal problems. Even though transgender people played an important role in the riots and the movement that proceeded it, their treatment in the movement was mixed, ranging from supportive to hostile.

Sylvia Rivera and [Marsha P. Johnson](#), active in both the GAA and GLF, became the movement’s most prominent trans activists. They formed a short-lived organization dedicated specifically to providing

services to trans people and street youth—Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries ([STAR](#)). Although often rejected and only occasionally welcomed, they stuck it out and refused to leave.

As Rivera described it, she was never going to let anyone prevent her from fighting for her own cause. Even in the face of jeers and insults, she worked to convince her gay comrades of their shared interests with trans people and street youth who were brutalized by the same police and rejected by the same society as gays and lesbians. After Sylvia fought her way to the stage at New York's 1972 Gay Pride march, she gave her famous, "Y'all Better Quite Down Now!," challenging the Gay Left's transphobia and making an uncompromising case for the centrality of solidarity in the struggle for liberation,

Y'all better quiet down. I've been trying to get up here all day for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail....

...You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation and you all treat me this way? What the fuck's wrong with you all? Think about that!

... I believe in gay power. I believe in us getting our rights, or else I would not be out there fighting for our right.

The people [STAR] are trying to do something for all of us, and not men and women that belong to a white middle class white club. And that's what you all belong to!

REVOLUTION NOW! Gimme a 'G'! Gimme an 'A'! Gimme a 'Y'! Gimme a 'P'! Gimme an 'O'! Gimme a 'W'! Gimme an 'E'! Gimme an 'R'! Gay power! Louder! GAY POWER!

Although transgender people found support from a layer of principled gay liberationists and segments of the radical and revolutionary left, mainstream gay and lesbian organization abandoned the trans community and consistently treated their demands for inclusion within the movement with out-right hostility, all the way up until the early 2000s.

It would take tireless organizing by trans people and their allies and another thirty years after the rebellion at Stonewall, an uprising where trans and gender non-conforming people played a pivotal role, until mainstream gay and lesbian organizations were forced to change course.

So what should activists make of this history?

Even today, although much is changing, the struggle to foreground the experiences and demands of trans people within the broader movement for sexual and gender liberation is far from complete.

LESSONS OF STONEWALL

So what should activists make of this history?

The first point is simple, rebellions work. Much like today's anti-racist uprising, Stonewall marked a pivotal turning point in LGBTQ history. Not because politicians introduce piecemeal legislation or NGO's organized black-tie fundraisers, but because ordinary people took matters into their own hands, challenged institutions of state repression and become active participants in shaping their own world.

Stonewall and today's unfolding rebellion demonstrate that there is power in numbers. What distinguished gay liberation from the homophile movement, and what allowed it to win significant reforms that had been unimaginable just a decade before, was its mass character. Similar to today, rather than settling for what the political establishment deems "realistic," Black and Brown trans and queer people broke through the confines of their own oppression and demanded what was necessary to improve the material conditions their lives.

As history continues to demonstrate, rebellions, because of their explosiveness, mass character and militancy—including physical violence, have the capacity to transform society's political landscape and completely upend the parameters of political "pragmatism." Mass uprisings repeatedly do more in a matter of days and weeks to advance the movement than years and decades of futile lobbying and electoral campaigns.

Secondly, police violence and incarceration are LGBT issues. Far from being an arbiter of justice, the criminal legal system functions to enforce hegemonic racialized and classed concepts of capitalist morality, sexual conformity, and compliance with traditional gender roles.

From ordinances criminalizing homosexuality and gender transgression with the advent of industrialization and urbanization, to police raids on gay bars and cruising spots in cities in the twentieth century, to the criminalization of LGBTQ homelessness and sex work in the era of mass incarceration, state regulation of sexual morality and gender expression are embedded within a system of policing and prisons designed to manage the symptoms of inequality, discipline working class and oppressed communities and maintain a system of capitalist social relations.

From the Compton Cafeteria Riots, to the Stonewall Rebellion to the anti-racist uprising unfolding today, LGBTQ people—particularly people of color and working class and poor people—have always been at the forefront of struggles against racist police terror.

Thirdly, solidarity is essential. What made the uprising at Stonewall so successful was the fact that it brought together a multi-racial, multi-gendered coalition of working-class and poor trans and queer people united against a common enemy. While race, gender, sexuality and class played a role in shaping the way trans and queer people experienced life pre-Stonewall, what gave them a basis to unite and struggle together that night was a shared experience of oppression at the hands of a common enemy.

Gay Liberation's insistence on the interconnectedness of liberation movements, its solidarity with the struggles of the most oppressed, and its willingness to challenge the capitalist order at the root of racial, gender and sexual oppression made it both threatening and powerful. However, as the radical movements of the 60s and 70s began to retreat and go into decline in the face of economic crisis, increased state repression and co-optation by the Democratic Party and sections of capital, the political horizons and aspirations of the Left began to recede and narrow. The spirit of solidarity that had animated the militancy of the 60s and 70s gave way to more conservative political ideas.

The gay and lesbian movement's abandonment of transgender people is not only morally indefensible, it represents an historic defeat and step backward for the movement as a whole. It is precisely this history of exclusion that makes today's outpouring of transgender activism, led by young black and brown trans people, such an historic turning point and advancement in the movement's history. Imaria Jones, a black transgender activist and writer, speaking on Democracy Now!, summarized the significance of the moment,

And I think that what's really powerful about what happened on Saturday is that it was the culmination of a lot of knowledge in our community, the fact that even though Black

and Brown trans women started the fight for LGBTQ liberation at Stonewall, that we were pushed out of it and have not benefited from the movement that we helped to start.

And we are saying that that's not going to happen, that we understand from history that when we try to.. prioritize some rights over others, when we try to prioritize certain groups of people over others, historically, we know that all the rights that are gained that way are fragile, that they don't last very long.

And so, the bottom line is that we all go, or nobody goes. And what we're saying is that we're going.

Thirdly, organization matters. Spontaneity and organization [aren't mutually exclusive](#)—they are two aspects of the same process, existing in a dialectical relationship. Spontaneous uprisings like Stonewall and today's anti-racist rebellion are inevitable under a system where people are beaten down and oppressed. Eventually decades of passivity and conservatism crack and people are transformed as they are flung into activity. They begin to shed old ideas, changing themselves and the world around them in ways that had previously been unthinkable.

Outbursts are best understood not as ends in and of themselves, but as starting points in a process in which large numbers of people become politically conscious and begin to recognize their collective power. The trajectory of these struggles is not linear. Nothing in history is automatic. Movements face political questions about how to move forward, there are debates over ideas, and organized political forces play a critical role in determining what direction they will go in. Rebuilding open, democratic organizing spaces where ordinary people can begin to plug and become engaged will be an important task for the movement today.

Lastly, formal rights, such as marriage equality and employment non-discrimination, are important and worth fighting for and defending. They provide tangible and concrete benefits that improve the lives of ordinary working-class trans and queer people and strike an ideological blow to the hegemony of reactionary ideas and beliefs that prop-up and legitimate the oppression of trans and queer and sow further divisions within the working class.

However, they're a first and limited step. Even in an era where LGBT people now experience more legal rights and formal equality than ever before, and where a section of gays and lesbians, mostly white, have been able to integrate themselves into the ruling echelons of capitalist society, oppression for the vast majority of working-class and poor trans and queer people, especially those livings on the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression, continues.

In order to address the crisis working class and poor trans and queer people, particularly people of color, experience in housing, healthcare and employment, the movement will need to go beyond formal equality under the law and take aim at confronting the material and economic conditions of trans and queer oppression. Our struggles will inevitably need challenge the priorities of a tiny, parasitical capitalist elite that manage the resources of society.

Winning radical structural reforms, like defunding and dismantling a system of policing and prisons that criminalize Black, Brown and poor LGBTQ people, redistributing wealth and resources into supporting community needs and social programs, trans and queer inclusive single-payer healthcare—including HIV/AIDS and mental health services, high quality public housing to eliminate homelessness, well funded public schools that are supportive and affirming for LGBTQ youth, eliminating poverty by guaranteeing a living wage and universal basic income to all, are just some of the measures that would radically transform the material conditions of life for the vast majority of

trans and queer people, particularly the most vulnerable and marginalized, and led us further down the path to a future of genuine liberation.

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