

CHAPTER 4

What a Riot! Direct Action, Collective Histories, and Collective Activism

All of us were working for so many movements at that time. Everyone was involved with the women's movement, the peace movement, the Civil Rights movement. We were all radicals. I believe that's what brought it around.

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Key Questions

1. Does rioting work?
2. Does protest work?
3. What kind of person would you expect to lead a political and social movement?
4. How do intersecting identities work in the context of riots and protests?
5. How did the split between L, G, B, and T come about?
6. How do we honor all histories of activism without privileging one group over another?

Chapter Overview

This chapter looks at political activism in the United States during the turbulent and politically charged 1950s and 1960s. The story of transgender activism, political movements, and coalition building is very much the story of intersecting identities and intersecting oppressions. In many cases, the beginnings of the legal reforms that support LGBTQ+ people in the United States today were brought about by trans people of color who lived at the poverty level or who were homeless. This convergence of being gender nonconforming or a gender outlaw, being

a person of color, and being someone who did not have financial security motivated and gave strength to these early activists. But this chapter does not solely focus on individuals who were part of historic activism; it also underscores the importance of collective histories and collective activism.

This chapter is not just about recovering lost heroes or arguing which exact person was responsible for a certain action. Rather, it is about the collective conditions and collective disruptions that helped shape activism. At the same time, it is also crucial to understand the ways that the LGBTQ+ community winds up becoming split, often in such a way that bisexual people are left out of conversations and transgender people are left out of important legislation, such as employment nondiscrimination protection. Infighting within the LGBTQ+ rights movement weakens us all; however, almost all civil rights and human rights movements have become divided. In minority histories, there is often an idea that there isn't enough pie to go around. This sort of thinking further silences marginalized people.

In looking at various forms of political action, from protests and riots to picket lines, you will also be examining how various groups of sexual and gender outlaws approached their need for recognition and rights. In many cases, another binary is set up: people who worked existing political systems and people who fought for liberation existing political systems. Some questions to keep in mind as you read this chapter: Can a person be radical and still work within the system? Can those who work outside the system still bring about systemic change? These were critical questions not only for the LGBTQ+ rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s but also for other social and political movements like the Civil Rights movement, the women's rights movement, the United Farmworkers' movement, the American Indian Movement, and the peace movement.

Ultimately, this chapter asks you to think more expansively about history and to understand that there is room for multiple histories. History is a living thing. As such, it is ever-expansive and can be empowering if we truly let it be all-inclusive.

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