Introduction

John D'Emilio

Gay liberation, the youngest of the movements for social change to emerge in the 1960's, exploded into life on a summer evening in June, 1969. The New York City police had raided a gay bar, the Stonewall, a common enough event in the gay world. But on that night, the gays at the scene in Greenwich Village fought back. With rocks, bottles and other street weapons they forcefully challenged police intrusion into their way of life.

The Stonewall Riot, and the flurry of activity and organizing which quickly followed, caught both the gay world and straight society by surprise. A political movement appeared seemingly full-grown yet without apparent roots. In fact, however, a homophile movement had existed for almost two decades before Stonewall, and the cultural, social and political ferment of the 1960's had created a setting in which gay liberation might emerge and thrive. The current movement, and, indeed, the place of the Gay Academic Union within it, is understandable only within that context.

Among minorities gay women and men have faced a unique set of problems in confronting an oppressive society: their identity as a group has remained invisible and unknown, and the social taboos against homosexual behavior have extended even to the public discussion of it. As long as such conditions prevailed, the requisites for a viable political movement were lacking.

John D'Emilio is a graduate student in the history department at Columbia University and is currently writing his dissertation on the homophile-gay liberation movement in the United States. He was a founding member of the Gay Academic Union, has served on its steering committee, and remains active in the organization. During the spring 1975 term he will be teaching a gay studies course at Montclair State College.

These circumstances changed markedly during the 1940's and early 1950's, as homosexual behavior became a matter of public concern, no longer restricted in its discussion to the pages of medical and psychiatric journals. During World War II the Army and Navy instituted for the first time systematic pyschiatric screening of inductees to weed out the mentally unfit; homosexual behavior and tendencies were, of course, categorized as undesirable. Although few members of the armed forces received exemptions or dismissals under this provision, gay men, and to an extent gay women, were made explicitly aware that their sexual prferences rendered them somehow unfit to serve their country.

Such open disapproval intensified as Cold War tensions led to the appearance of McCarthyism as a political force in America. The search for a scapegoat for our foreign policy failures pushed the more demagogic elements in national politics to an attack upon "sexual perverts" in government. Slanderous speeches on the floor of the Senate, congressional investigations into government hiring policies, security classifications, and the dismissal and blacklisting of foreign service officials by the score, highlighted the precariousness of being gay. The cloak of invisibility surrounding society's gay minority was slowly lifting, but at the cost of greater sanctions and a tightening circle of oppression.

Other social forces were, meanwhile, circumscribing the lives of lesbian women. After the disrupting effects of almost two decades of depression and war on family life, Americans in the postwar period were stampeding toward the security of marriage. The popular press, including women's magazines, extolled the virtues of childrearing and downgraded the importance, and even the appropriateness, of a career outside the home for women. Even though their participation in the labor force remained high, women worked more often than not to supplement family income rather than as a means to financial and personal freedom. As social disapproval of the independent career woman mounted, the lesbian woman whose preferences inclined her to a life-style independent of men found herself in an increasingly difficult position.

In this setting of blatant hostility and diminishing options, gay women and men began for the first time to organize. The early 1950's witnessed the tentative beginnings of three homophile organizations on the West Coast: Mattachine, Daughters of Bilitis, and One, Inc. The impulse behind their formation was not, to be sure, purely defensive, nor was it a sign of desperation. For in the midst of pervasive social condemnation, lesbian women and gay men at last possessed a weapon which had dramatically broken through the doors of silence and opened a pathway to change.

The Kinsey studies of male and female sexual behavior were both novel and startling: their method was unprecedented and their findings unanticipated. A team of highly trained natural and behavioral scientists, using the technique of face-to-face interviewing, had obtained the sexual histories of

several thousand Americans from every geographic region and along the whole spectrum of economic and social status. The reports were widely discussed in both scholarly journals and the popular press; Kinsey became a household word. His findings were significant in many respects, but nowhere more so than in the area of homosexual behavior among males and females. For Kinsey found that both in incidence and as a percentage of total sexual outlet, sexual activity between members of the same gender was far more extensive than anyone had believed. And in the rating of individuals along a heterosexual-homosexual continuum, Kinsey suggested a fluidity to human sexuality that defenders of traditional morality could only have considered shocking.

Armed with the knowledge that their sexual orientation was neither unusual nor, as Kinsey emphasized, "unnatural," the first members of the early homophile organizations embarked upon their work. Societal attitudes militated against too public a course of action, but among themselves gays discussed their common problems and began verbalizing their hopes for social change. By the early 1960's DOB and Matttachine had spread to the East Coast, and in Washington, D.C., public acts of protest were being conducted by Mattachine members against federal employment policies. The growing number of gay groups formed a loose coalition, the North American Conference of Homophile Organizations. At annual conventions, NACHO representatives shared ideas, debated tactics, and formulated goals.

Growth was slow, however, and expectations remained limited; after almost two decades, the homophile movement's impact on both the larger society and the gay subculture was hardly discernible. The Stonewalll Riot and the sudden burgeoning of gay liberation thus caught everyone by surprise. What had happened to push an invisible and fragmented minority (stigmatized, harassed, and also extremely vulnerable to attack) to persistently demand recognition and acceptance?

Gay liberation offers revealing insights into the dynamics of social change, into how the struggle of an oppressed group for recognition does not occur in a vacuum but is dependent upon other forces at work in society. The 1960's was one of the most tumultuous decades in America's history: social attitudes and cultural forms were sharply criticized and the political order attacked. Without revealing themselves, gay women and men participated in and were affected by these events. As antiwar activists and student radicals, they defied the police in the streets and on the campuses. As counterculture adherents they eagerly embraced life-styles sharply at odds with the dominant mode. As Afro-Americans stigmatized by skin color, they transformed the mark of their oppression into a symbol of pride and self-assertion. And as feminists they challenged traditional sex roles and long-established notions of femininity and masculinity. Equality, justice and the freedom to be different became rallying cries for those who felt

alientated from the American mainstream. As the decade drew to a close, gay Americans joined the ranks of protest and expressed their demands for change.

That gay liberation was, to a certain extent, spawned by earlier protest movements is apparent in the rhetoric, style and tactics of its early years. The Gay Liberation Front, the first of the the militant organizations, attempted to reach decisions consensually, in New Left style, after full and open debate. "The personal is political" and "Gay is good" were articles of faith. GLF adopted the tactics of confrontation while also asserting solidarity with the struggles of other oppressed groups. Never national in its structure, autonomous GLF chapters were, nonetheless, formed on college campuses and in cities across the country.

The politics of GLF were too radical, however, for it to attract many segments of the gay community; it was not long before some of its members separated to form an organization of another sort. The Gay Activists Alliance, while also militant in its espousal of confrontation tactics, eschewed involvement with other political issues and movements. It was a one-issue organization, concerned solely with attaining full acceptance for gays in American society. GAA was also local in structure. Gays in a number of cities, though they adopted the name, remained independent.

In just a few short years GLF, GAA, and a host of other gay liberation groups accomplished much. Through their public acts of protest they ended the invisibility of the nation's largest unrecognized minority and threw before a public reluctant to be disabused of its prejudices a new image of gayness. For many in the gay community, the movement offered an opportunity to discard the mask of secrecy and shed the self-hatred generated by a hostile society. Gay women and men in large numbers were for the first time taking pride in being different.

Diversity was the movement's hallmark, a crucial factor in attracting adherents and stimulating political action on a variety of fronts. Yet diverse as the gay liberation and homophile organizations were, they by and large shared one important characteristic: their membership was composed of individuals acting publicly to win acceptance of their private life-style. The gay activist of whatever persuasion was working with others on the basis of a common sexual orientation.

Herein lies the significance of the Gay Academic Union. In a real sense GAU represents a new plateau in the gay movement—gay women and men struggling together around their place of work. (I do not mean to suggest here that GAU is either the first or the only organization of this sort; merely that it is but one example of a trend discernible in several occupational areas.) If the gay activist experiences a sense of liberation through the public avowal of gayness, imagine the heightened exhilaration felt when the espousal of one's gay identity takes place within the context of one's life work, when private self and public role come together, and the relevance

and connectedness of one to the other is asserted and acted upon.

Exhilaration is, perhaps, too weak a word. It only faintly expresses the shared feelings of those who attended the initial GAU meetings. The organization came into being almost by accident; the first meeting was not really a meeting at all. On a Saturday afternoon late in March 1973, seven men and one woman—college faculty, graduate students, a writer and a director, all gay—gathered informally in a Manhattan apartment. We were mostly strangers to each other. We were all interested in discussing problems encountered in doing research. We came from a variety of academic disciplines. Some of us had done research in what might broadly be construed as gay studies while others were virtually untutored. Our conversation ranged widely. We talked in highly personal terms of the difficulties of being gay in a university setting, how we coped with being in the closet, if that were the case, or what sort of reaction coming out had engendered. A couple of people had taught or were preparing to teach gay-oriented courses and the rest of us listened with interest to their class-room experiences and the hassles involved in obtaining administration approval for such courses. Perhaps most enlightening, however, was the discovery that our academic training, regardless of discipline or particular research interests, allowed each of us to contribute something of substance, some insight, to the discussion. Ideas bounced about the room; we fed off each other intellectually. Several hours of stimulating talk—the afternoon passed quickly that Saturday—had created a quite tangible sense of kinship among us. We had encountered a large measure of commonality in our personal experiences and aspirations and an exciting complementarity in our professional skills.

We resolved to meet again in two weeks, to continue from where we had unwillingly left off. At the second gathering our numbers had doubled. Informally we had passed on to our gay academic friends a description of the first meeting that awakened interest and appealed to deeply-felt needs. Indeed, throughout the spring and summer, as our biweekly sessions continued, new faces kept appearing. By the fourth meeting there was a pervasive awareness that as gay teachers, scholars and writers, we could contribute to the gay movement and to our own liberation by organizing in a formal way.

Something very special happened that summer as the Gay Academic Union slowly took shape. My life, and the lives of many of the other active participants, changed fundamentally. We did not merely create another gay activist organization. Slowly, and at times painfully, we raised our consciousness as gays as we grappled with the inevitable political issues involved in forming GAU.

The spirit of those first months was not entirely fortuitous. It owed much to the setting in which we met, to our previous background in the gay movement, and of course to the fact that we were academics. Gathering

in the apartments of members, we avoided the rigidified atmosphere of sterile meeting halls with their straight-backed chairs. We spread ourselves in circular fashion around a living room, sprawling on the floor, sitting on window sills, leaning against walls. The physical arrangement militated against anyone being thrust, willingly or not, into a position of leadership. Few of us, moreover, had had any previous experience in gay politics. We were novices without a fixed and unbending political stance, articulating and working out for the first time the politics of being gay. Our shared ignorance saved us from one deadly peril. We ranged in status from first-year graduate students to chaired professors and department chairpersons. Surely it was an ideal setting in which to pull rank, yet it never happened. An abiding respect for the opinions of others suffused our sessions. We listened patiently for we recognized, I think, that in our untutored state we all had something to learn.

And, of course we were academics. The verbal nitpicking for which we are famous at last served us well. No statement went unquestioned; no idea escaped merciless scrutiny. GAU's statement of purpose which, when read today, seems a model of clarity and simplicity, took six weeks of prolonged discussion before it was finally approved. We debated the relative merits of the terms "homosexual" and "gay." We agonized over whether explicitly to include bisexuals in it; whether concerned heterosexuals should be made welcome; what precisely would constitute "new approaches" to the study of the gay experience; whether gay studies was, really, a valid concept.

In retrospect the earnestness with which some of these questions were considered appears somewhat excessive, but the entire process was invaluable. For the painstaking, often tedious, debate which characterized our meetings led not merely to the careful articulation of personal positions but also to a deeply-felt sharing, a sense of cooperative effort, of collective accomplishment. We learned a lot about ourselves and a lot about each other. We came to trust one another as friends of long-standing.

Nowhere was this process more fully played out than in the debates over sexism, feminism, and whether GAU could accomodate meaningfully the needs of both lesbian women and gay men. The questions were hardly new ones. One could easily write the history of the homophile/gay-liberation movement as a story of male and female separatism. Few, if any, gay organizations have witnessed the equal participation of women and men. Gay men clearly share here more with their heterosexual counterparts than they care to admit. Raised as men in a male-dominated culture they have incorporated the sexist attitudes which perpetuate the caste-like status of women in America. Rarely do gay men understand that the lesbian's oppression stems as much from her womanhood as from her gayness; rarely do they couple their expectations for lesbian cooperation in the gay movement with a commitment to women-related issues; rarely do gay men appreciate the interconnectedness of the feminist struggle against traditional sex roles and rigid gender identification and the gay male's fight for acceptance. Of all the political issues debated in GAU, feminism aroused the most passion.

From the start GAU was overwhelmingly male in membership; until August, there were never more than three women at any meeting. While proclaiming our intention to create an organization for men and women, we (the men) found ingenuous explanations for the persistent and rather glaring absence of women: women were underrepresented in the academic community; most lesbian academics were probably committing their energy to the women's movement; word-of-mouth recruitment of new members, a temporary phenomenon until we were better organized, perpetuated the numerical preponderance of males. Our rationalizations contained just the degree of plausibility to allow us to retain our illusions. But we could not banish the problem entirely. At virtually every meeting the women in GAU challenged the chauvinism of the men. And some of the men were finally confronting a most unpleasant fact: the few women who did attend a meeting rarely returned beyond a second time.

In mid-August we at last decided to devote an entire meeting to the problem of sexism among gay men and how to assure the equal participation of women in GAU. The session began with testimony from a man and a woman, the one describing the subtle ways in which his own male behavior often proved oppressive of women, the other describing the particular problems she faced as a lesbian woman. We then broke into small groups randomly chosen to discuss the issues and to devise concrete proposals for the general meeting to debate. The outcome was revealing. For while each of the groups expressed the hope that women would come to feel welcome in GAU, only one, in which three of the six participants were women, had specific recommendations. (To this day I do not know whether the statistically improbable concentration of women in one group was fortuitous or whether, as I suspect, it reflected the shrewdness which the underdog must cultivate to survive.) Their resolutions were provocative: 1) that our statement of purpose be amended to include as our *first* goal, "to oppose all forms of discrimination against all women in academia," and 2) that regardless of their numerical inferiority, women in GAU should have 50 percent of the voting power.

Debate on the first proposal took place that night. It was heated and impassioned, and carried us beyond midnight. Many of the men reacted as if their lifeblood were being tapped. GAU was being transformed, they charged, from a gay to a feminist organization. What relevance did many women's issues have to gay oppression? Why should gays support the feminist movement when many women's groups were so hostile to gays?

The women, with the support of some men, responded patiently and persuasively. The two movements were intimately connected, they argued. As long as women were relegated to a second-class position in society, the

root cause of the gay male's opression—sexism—would remain. As long as the notion persisted that women were inferior to men, then gay men, whose love for other men was branded "womanly" or "effeminate" by the dominant culture, would remain oppressed.

The women presented their case well. It took several hours but when the resolution came to a vote enough of the men had been persuaded of its cogency for it to pass by a substantial majority. Exhaustion ruled out debate on the second recommendation; it was deferred to the following meeting.

That next meeting almost ruptured GAU irreparably. The proposal was defeated. It was too stark an assault upon the almost reflexive allegiance to democratic structures; it was asking too much to expect that forty men would diminish their voting power to equal that of six women. In its stead a compromise was adopted, acceptable to the women, which created a much-needed steering committee, empowered to plan the agenda for meetings and to make interim decisions, with equal male and female representation. Although the final outcome was satisfying, however, the tenor of the debate was appalling. Quite a few of the men in GAU had already accepted, intellectually, the women's position. But sexism goes beyond intellect. For men's commitment to feminist goals to have substance to it, we (the men) had to get in touch with those attitudes and feelings so deeply bred that they are scarcely noticed. The women could not do it for us; it had to come from ourselves.

During the evening's debate some of the men, through the flagrant sexism of their remarks, unwittingly held up a mirror in which others could glimpse themselves. It was impossible not to squirm with embarrassment at statements like "Some of my best friends are women, but I'm not going to let them take over my organization," or "I've marched for feminist causes, but this is a gay organization." It was a humbling experience! Shocked out of their sexist complacency a large group of men in GAU were now prepared to make an earnest effort in support of the women's view. They also realized that in this sensitive area men had to be willing, at times, to surrender their prerogative of independent judgment and admit that others were wiser than they.

GAU had taken a major step in the right direction. But the problem of membership remained. As long as recruitment came informally by word-of-mouth, the numerical preponderance of men would continue and with it the danger of a slipping into old ways. We expected a solution to come from a conference being planned for Thanksgiving weekend. It was advertised widely in newspapers and periodicals and publicized through gay and feminist organizations. What would be the response?

A conference! The decision to hold one had been made simultaneously with the determination to form the Gay Academic Union. We were all veterans of academic conventions, those tedious assemblages where dry scholarship is disseminated among dried-out people. How appropriate for

us to take this worn-out form and remake it into a celebration of gayness! The conference would be our coming out.

Planning began early in July; Thanksgiving weekend was the time chosen. We had but four months in which to find a place, sketch out a program, select speakers. The work was done by an open committee of volunteers, forever expanding as our tasks increased, meeting more frequently as November approached. In many ways the conference committee mirrored GAU as a whole. The same spirit permeated our meetings; a similar patience characterized our debates; every decision was painstakingly made.

We easily agreed that a university was the most suitable setting. After being rebuffed by a number of major schools in New York, we obtained the facilities of the City University's John Jay College of Criminal Justice (a precious irony). Other questions required more discussion: Should heterosexual scholars be invited to participate? Do we aim for celebrities to enhance our media appeal? Should we rely only upon our own membership for speakers?

We dismissed the idea of inviting anyone who was not gay to participate. Although there were straight scholars in a number of fields whose work lacked the biases of a heterosexual value-system, we felt strongly that it was important for us, as gays, to delineate our own critique of the prevailing wisdom and suggest our own alternatives. Rejected, too, was the celebrity path. It ran contrary to the implicit respect in which we held each other for us to grovel in search of media scholars to legitimize our endeavor. No. We would plan our program first and then select those individuals, whether renowned or not, most capable of meeting our needs. In some cases we were to draw upon our own membership; in others, we had to search elsewhere.

GAU's purposes reflected both personal and professional concerns: combatting discrimination, mutual support in coming out, encouraging unbiased scholarship and the teaching of gay studies. A conference program mixing sessions of the whole and small discussion groups evolved which integrated all of these goals. The first day's panel was entitled "Scholarship and the Gay Experience." Our intention was to focus on the ways in which scholarly activity had contributed to the oppression of gays and to suggest alternative avenues of thought. We were not looking for meticulously footnoted research papers; rather we sought speakers who would cover a generous chunk of intellectual territory. The sciences, religion, education, literature, and the social sciences were the scope of the panel. Following it we scheduled informal workshops led by GAU members along disciplinary lines in which gays of similar interests might meet and talk.

We deliberately oriented the first sessions around "scholarly" concerns. Attendance at the conference for many, we reasoned, would be their first public act as gays, and we ought, therefore, to usher them in on familiar

ground. We hoped to offer an atmosphere conducive enough to relaxed interaction so that by the following day personal concerns could be discussed freely. "Coming Out in the University," the second day's panel, was to be an experience of a different sort. Here we asked speakers to talk more directly about their gayness; about their decisions to come out, or the need to keep passing; about the reaction of students and colleagues, both positive and negative; about the changes which coming out effected in their lives. We assembled a panel whose members ranged from undergraduate to full professor and whose institutional affiliations ran the gamut from prestigious urban universities to rural colleges. Again, after the panel we scheduled smaller group discussions where each of us could talk about coming out.

The mood of the conference committee oscillated. Overcome with enthusiasm at times, we projected hordes of gay academics pouring out of the closet and into our conference. How would we accomodate the crowds of eager scholars? Or we quaked at the prospect of panelists speaking to an empty auditorium. Neither extreme materialized. We attracted a group of about three hundred, a perfect fit for the facilties we had available. And the conference was, by all standards, a resounding success. The ebullient spirit which made GAU and planned the conference was infectious. Three hundred gay academics, women and men, working together, sharing ideas, feeling good, and proud to be gay!

The following pages are an attempt to share that experience with you. Unfortunately we can only partially recreate it. The committee vetoed any taping of the workshops and other small groups, believing that it might inhibit free and open discussion. What follows then are transcripts of the keynote addresses, the two panels, and a summary of the women's caucus. In a sense, even these are incomplete. Characteristic of the panels was a dynamic interchange between speaker and audience. There was no way, however, to transcribe effectively outbursts of laughter and applause, or the subtle intonations of voice suggestive of irony, passion, confusion, etc. But we hope, nonetheless, that you will share through your reading some sense of the Gay Academic Union and the people who have made it what it is, and a better understanding of "the universities and the gay experience." □

Part I

The Opening Session