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978-0-521-00377-3 - The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the
Gay and Lesbian Movement

Stephen M. Engel

Excerpt

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Introduction

The essential link between author and reader, no matter how great the time difference, is a common humanity, a common psychological makeup or generic consciousness, that grounds the intuitive ability to empathize with other persons. David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle*

I cannot afford to believe that freedom from intolerance is the right of only one particular group . . . so long as we are divided because of our particular identities we cannot join together in effective political action.

Audre Lorde

Why this book?

It is a simple question, and often, simple questions have deceptively complex answers. My mentor on this project suggested that I should be able to summarize the objective and findings of this text in three sentences or less. Finally, somewhere nearing the end of this endeavor, I was able to convey what I had written. The following pages disclose a comparative study of the American and British gay and lesbian movements since the end of the Second World War. The aim is to discover in what ways these two social movements interact with governing structures, whether they be separation-of-powers or parliamentary-based, and how those systems influence the goals, strategies, and achievements of these movements. In so doing, I hoped to provide some useful insight into the evolution of social movement theory, its historical trends, and its future directions.

In essence the question boils down to two words: who wins? Are British queers in a better situation than American queers or *vice versa*? Through this work I attempted a strict social scientific undertaking, or so I had thought over three years ago when I began to research the project. Along the way, I discovered secondary goals. Through this text, I could help elucidate the often confusing nature of multiple social movement theories ranging from the classical and Marxist approaches to resource mobilization theory, political opportunity structures, and

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

the political process model. I could investigate and discuss the role culture plays in a once-conceived purely political game. Through this text, I could demonstrate both the theoretical and practical similarities and distinctions between parliamentary and separation-of-powers systems. Through this text, I could introduce readers to a history to which they may never have been previously exposed.

Indeed, through the course of researching this book, I was struck by the proliferation of historical analyses that took the gay and lesbian community as its subject. However, I also could not help but notice the relative absence of work which has tied this history to a sociological frame by which to understand the gay and lesbian movements themselves. Exceptions to this observation are apparent,¹ but the vast majority of these studies have been published during the latter half of the 1990s despite the visibility of this modern movement since the 1970s. Thus, my goal became, in part, to add to the growing analysis of a movement whose goals and visibility have dramatically affected electoral and cultural politics in the United States and the United Kingdom in the closing decades of the twentieth century.

Besides accounting for my focus on the gay and lesbian movement, as opposed to the numerous other “new” social movements or other identity-based movements that have flourished in the post-war period, I feel that I must justify my choice of the United States and the United Kingdom for comparison. Selecting these two particular countries stems from my original question: How do differing political environments, including distinct political institutions such as the party structure and electoral system, on the one hand, and political culture, on the other, affect the development, maintenance, and strategies of a movement? The choice of the British and American governing structures then appears somewhat odd. Except that one is a parliamentary and the other a separation-of-powers system, the two-party structure would lead to similar tactics on the part of the movement. Indeed, the analysis, some might say, might have greater insight if I had compared the American movement to one in a country with a multi-party proportional representation system such as Germany or a non-Anglican nation such as Japan. However, the comparison of the United States and the United Kingdom raises interesting questions which belie the superficial similarities of their political party structure.² How does a centralized (British) versus decentralized (American) system affect a social movement? How does an independent (American) judiciary influence a movement, or does its absence (in the United Kingdom) hinder or help to concentrate a movement organization’s agenda and strategies? In terms of political culture, how does a heterogeneous population, a lack of historic class

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

cleavages, and a history of civil rights movements (all in the United States) play against a political cultural environment (in the United Kingdom) that is relatively homogenous, has a strong history of economic class-based cleavages, and a relatively minor history of identity-based and civil rights precursor movements? My analysis revealed some surprisingly counterintuitive conclusions.

I intended to accomplish all of these objectives and provide, if not direct answers, at least insights into these questions. It is in the reader's hands to estimate whether I have done so justly and with relative academic vigor. However, never at any time was this text to be clouded by emotional controversies, for staking my opinion on one side or the other of debates which afflict this movement was not within the scope of this undertaking. The value-laden debate of so-called queer nationalism versus less in-your-face tactics was not pursued. While the circumstances and facets of this debate are made clear in chapter 2, I tried to make no judgment on the validity of either side. Never was the role and seeming invisibility of the person of color in the gay and lesbian movement undertaken in a moral sense. Certainly, the issue was presented, but no judgment was made. Never was the conflict which has plagued this movement since its inception, that between liberation and legislation, between revolution and reform – often personified in the United States in the personalities of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force on one side and the Human Rights Campaign on the other – embedded in a value judgment. The conflict was presented as one of the many schisms that has splintered the movement throughout its modern history, but no further judgments were disclosed. The same is true for commonly controversial issues within this movement: pornography, sadomasochism, barebacking, etc.

In short, my social scientific analysis was as it should be: devoid of emotion. Yet on 14 October 1998 I stood shivering on the steps of the Capitol Building in Washington, DC at a candlelight vigil for the slain Matthew Shepard. Shepard, a twenty-one year old student at the University of Wyoming, died on 12 October 1998 after being tortured, beaten, and tied to a fence by two peers for being gay. Our similarities in age and circumstance did not escape me, and I huddled with the warm light of the candle experiencing the gamut of emotions from fear to confusion to denial to sadness to anger, and I realized that an emotionally empty account of this movement fails to do justice to the individuals who work every day so that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people can live safer and happier lives.³

The last two years before the close of the twentieth century witnessed a remarkable degree of activity on both sides of the “gay issue.”

Cambridge University Press

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Stephen M. Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

Throughout the summer of 1998, conservative right-wing organizations such as the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Coalition poured millions of dollars into a national newspaper ad campaign claiming that gays and lesbians were diseased, an abomination in the eyes of God, and in need of a cure. These groups have manipulated the Bible's word to discriminate against gays and lesbians just as their predecessors used the same Bible to justify slavery and segregation. Their incessant and unrelenting scapegoating of gays and lesbians in an effort to score political points with a relatively apathetic electorate in an election year led unavoidably to the murder of Matthew Shepard: the exploited and twisted so-called words of a just God succeeded only in killing an innocent man.

What these right-wing groups have failed to grasp and have failed to grasp since the birth of the New Right, whether now in their battle against a sexual minority or in years past against a racial or religious minority, is that the true lesson of the Bible is not hate nor division, but love and unity. And yet, every day gays and lesbians are denied this right to express their love by the remaining criminal bans on consensual homosexual sex, the state's failure to recognize and sanction gay partnerships/marriage, the continued misguided relegation of gay and lesbian concerns and identity to the private sphere, and the continued controversy over gay parenting and adoption.

The summer of 1998 witnessed another heated debate centered on the rights of gays and lesbians. The Hefley Amendment sought to overturn Executive Order 13087, which stated that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation would not be tolerated in the hiring and general employment practices of the federal work-force. After arguments were heard in the House of Representatives, the amendment was defeated, and the Executive Order remained in place. Yet, in nearly forty states in these United States of America, an individual can still be denied the ability to earn a living simply because he or she may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

Why am I writing all this? Is this merely an ill-placed emotional catharsis on the part of the writer? The purpose of this brief section, and, in a sense, of all the pages that follow it, is to reveal that in the shadow of the next millennium, we have a long journey to travel.

The title of this work is *The Unfinished Revolution*. Hidden in the word "revolution" is "evolution." Such evolution refers to a primary theme of this work: the continuous development and expansion of social movement theory over the past sixty years. The unfinished *revolution*, an idea and phrase borrowed from an observation by British scholar Jeffrey Weeks – quoted in chapter 3 – refers to the unfinished revolution in

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

values of the heterosexual majority not merely to tolerate sexual minorities, but to do away entirely with the cultural power dynamic of the acceptor and the accepted as well as the unfinished nature of the gay and lesbian movement itself. Even my subtitle, in reference to the “gay and lesbian movement” as opposed to the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movement reminds the reader of the continued internal conflict within the sexual minorities movement. Does the bisexual or transgender person have a role in this movement? Are issues surrounding transgenerism in line with the gay and lesbian equal rights agenda? Are gays and lesbians committing the same sexual squeamishness or worse, prejudice, towards transgenders as heterosexuals commit against gays and lesbians? The movement has accomplished so much in the past fifty years (as this book endeavors to illustrate). Yet, its achievements have been fraught with setbacks, such as Anita Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign, the onset of AIDS, the “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy, the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), or the frustrating 1996 defeat of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA). As I now reflect on that title, as I relive the emotions of that chill October evening’s vigil, I come to understand that *The Unfinished Revolution* has a far greater meaning. It embodies all revolutions in which people struggled and died in the name of personal freedom. And thus, it includes, but its scope is not limited to, the American Revolution, and how even that revolution remains unfinished. For that revolution, in its most base terms, was a fight for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” As long as people, any people, whether gay, straight, bi, male, female, black, white, Asian, Latino, or transgender, are denied the right to be who they are, are forced to live in fear of being who they want to be, are indeed violently murdered for loving another human being, then even the American Revolution will remain an unfinished revolution.

That is why I wrote this text. Certainly it was to cover all those issues and questions raised at the beginning of this passage, but more importantly, it was to reveal the struggle and strength of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, and thereby to promote greater understanding of the movement’s goals. It was with the hope that maybe a person would read this book and realize that those newspaper ads issued by right-wing conservatives were ill-spirited, misguided, and inspired only by hate. It was to help prevent another tragic hate crime. My only regret is that I know this book to be fundamentally incapable of these goals and that it will be seen (perhaps) as just another interesting commentary on the applicability of social movement theory. And the revolution will remain sadly unfinished until enough tragedies force us to realize our own *inhumanity*. Only at that point will we be able to rediscover together

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Introduction

our common humanity – our collective empathy – and embrace our diversity and the strength it necessarily provides.

Navigating through this text

The American and British gay and lesbian movements, despite seemingly parallel developmental histories, have experienced distinct legal and political outcomes. In the year 2000, private consensual homosexual sex between two individuals at least eighteen years of age is legal in the United Kingdom, while any homosexual relations are still criminal acts in approximately twenty states in the United States. This fact, like numerous other current circumstances, is quite paradoxical given that, as this book endeavors to illustrate, the post-war American movement has historically functioned as the leader among similar movements throughout the world: it developed first, it has the largest number of participants and highest level of resources, and its tactics and ideologies have been appropriated by other nations.⁴ How can we account for this paradox?

Of course, this question encompasses a series of other inquiries. What is the gay and lesbian movement? Who makes up this movement? Or even more fundamentally, what is a social movement? Are the movement and the gay community separate, merged, and/or mutually reinforcing? How does the American movement compare to its British counterpart? Did these respective movements develop according to similar patterns? What are the aims of these movements? Have the movements achieved their goals? Has the American movement been more or less successful than the British variant? What accounts for distinct levels of social movement success? This book attempts to answer these questions in the hope of elucidating not only the current status, but also providing perspective and possible prediction regarding the future fates of the movements in both countries.

In order to analyze the gay and lesbian movement in either country, we must first understand the nature of a social movement and collective behavior in general. Hence, chapter 1 provides a multifaceted model to comprehend collective behavior commonly referred to as the political process model (PPM). The discussion of social movement theories is fleshed out in the appendix. The appendix provides a more thorough survey of common theoretical explanations of collective social insurgency from both the American and Marxist schools, including the classical model, rational choice, resource mobilization, new social movement theory, and political opportunity structure. By including the appendix, I provide not so much a literature review as a timeline of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

evolution of thought on social movements. The appendix relays a foundational knowledge of important theories while grounding them in empirical examples. Both chapter 1 and the appendix explore the ability of theory to distort historical reality, how each of these theories utilize different levels of analysis, how they are interrelated, and, indeed, how each, save the political process model, falls short of providing satisfactory explanations of movement development and existence.

The political process model (PPM) exists in two parts. The first section isolates three critical variables necessary for movement emergence: changing opportunity structure, pre-existing organizations to exploit this opportunity, and some type of cognitive liberation which promotes positive collective identity and legitimizes mass participation. These factors interact to produce a social movement. In the second part, the interest groups spawned by the movement interact with political institutions to produce outcomes that can either support or hinder the movement's agenda. By the end of the chapter, we are prepared to apply the theoretical tools provided by the two-part paradigm of the political process model (PPM).

Chapter 2 is an historical sketch of the American post-war gay and lesbian movement. I refer to it as a "sketch" because the chapter does not go into great detail regarding much of the tempestuous nature of many internal debates within the movement community nor does it relay a copious account of influential leaders, although key players and their contributions are mentioned in due fashion. Rather, it provides a *foundational* knowledge with which to apply and test the validity of our theoretical model – the primary aim of the text. Starting with an interpretation of the Second World War as the necessary opportunity for movement development, it traces the establishment of homophile organizations such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis in the 1950s and 1960s. It then turns to an evaluation of gay liberation and the politicization of "coming out" as the necessary cognitive liberation to engender mass mobilization. The critical turning point in modern American gay history, as cited by numerous historians, is the Stonewall Riots of 1969. In this text, however, the riots are not only seen as the foundation of the modern movement, but also as the concrete example which bridges the theoretical Parts I and II of the political process model. The impact of the AIDS crisis on the movement's equal rights agenda is assessed. Lastly, sundry events of the past decade, including the gays-in-the-military debate, the 1992 presidential election, and the increase in mainstream visibility of gays and lesbians, are discussed to demonstrate the extent of movement success. The analysis reveals a movement which has traditionally functioned at local and state levels

Cambridge University Press

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Stephen M. Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Introduction

and has been plagued by gender rifts and struggles between militant versus moderate approaches; the AIDS crisis has served to expand its agenda and methodology to include federally oriented interest groups and nationwide goals.

Chapter 3 tracks the developmental history of the British gay and lesbian movement in the same time period, and it too functions as a foundational sketch with which to test the applicability of the political process model. We witness that the Second World War provided a similar opportunity as it did in the United States, but also that various other events, including the 1954 Wildeblood–Montagu trial and the establishment of the Wolfenden Committee on Prostitution and Homosexuality later that same year, fostered an environment amenable to homosexual legal reform. The chapter explores the role of the parliamentary lobby, the Homosexual Law Reform Society, the liberal culture of social reform which characterized the United Kingdom in the 1960s, and the implementation of the Wolfenden recommendations to decriminalize homosexuality – with certain restrictions on the age of consent and the definition of privacy – in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act. This reform subsequently deflated further impetus for collective behavior, and we see that British gay liberation of the 1970s is only a partially successful appropriation of the American model. Lastly, the chapter examines the effect of AIDS, evaluates how mobilization against Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Bill provided the cognitive liberation that gay liberation failed to do (to the extent it had in the United States), and assesses the prospects of the movement given the election of Labour in 1997 after eighteen years of Conservative rule. This evaluation reveals a movement that has both paradoxically attained legal reform before it was fully formed, i.e., no great degree of cognitive liberation nor collective identity formation had taken shape, and is now potentially better situated (with regard to institutional opportunity) than its American contemporary to attain its goals, despite the fact that much of its foundational ideology was appropriated from the American model.

If the book ended at this point, the reader might walk away with the misguided belief that both the American and British movements (being similar) would have attained the same level of political and legal reform with respect to gay and lesbian equal rights, or that the American movement, being more diverse, having more constituents, amassing more resources, and thereby being generally stronger, should have attained more favorable legislation. *While they follow similar developmental patterns – each displaying instances of changing opportunity, pre-existing organizations, and cognitive liberation – they have, in fact, achieved different levels of political and legal success. Why?* Chapter 4 answers this question

Cambridge University Press

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Stephen M. Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

by utilizing part two of the political process model. It compares the parliamentary and separation-of-powers systems and seeks to ascertain how these political structures influence the tactics and achievements of social movement organizations. Essentially, the American separation-of-powers system provides interest groups with more agenda access, but the centralized British parliamentary structure establishes both greater capability for policy implementation and increased interest group access *if* a supportive political party is in power. The difference in political institutions and the subsequent different opportunities and venues they provide resolve the paradox that the larger American movement has still failed to attain any national level rights-protection legislation while its smaller British contemporary has done so or that the British ban on gays serving openly in the military has been lifted while the American ban, despite or because of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” remains intact. British political institutions engendered national gay legal reform under a Labour majority in 1967 despite the relative non-existence of a mass movement comparable to that emerging across the Atlantic. The American federalist separation-of-powers has hindered national legislation by promoting multiple veto points while simultaneously encouraging gay-related issues to be debated at the local and state levels as well as through litigation.

Although the political process model has been explored and its robust quality demonstrated, new research in social movement theory may indicate that the analysis is not thorough enough. The inherent problem may be more clearly understood if we start with sociologist Ken Plummer’s concept of the gay and lesbian movement as “a broadly based overlapping cluster of arenas of collective activity lodged in social worlds in which change is accomplished: some of it is overtly political, and some of it is economic (the Pink Economy), but much of it is cultural.”⁵ Plummer acknowledges that a key component of the movement is what has been discussed to this point, namely formally structured organizations that work through the existing political institutional environments to promote and preserve legal change concerning equal rights. However, the movement consists of scenes such as bars or social organizations, gay and lesbian media, self-help organizations, academia, that is, the development of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory, rituals and marches, and the burgeoning community on the Internet.⁶ Many of these other areas that comprise this movement are hinted at and discussed throughout the case study presentations in chapter 2 and chapter 3. Yet, as the concept of movements as not merely political but also as containing a *cultural* component has been a recent topic of debate and research by students of social movements, this text would be

Cambridge University Press

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Stephen M. Engel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Introduction

incomplete and the gay and lesbian movement inaccurately portrayed if some degree of cultural analysis is not performed. An increasing number of sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists are examining not only how the dominant culture affects movement development, but how the movement itself generates its own reinforcing culture through the use of interpretive ritual and collective identity formation.

Thus, in chapter 5 we come full circle to the central premise of chapter 1, namely that no theoretical model is collectively exhaustive. This chapter introduces the element of culture as it influences movement behavior. The political process model fails to account for the role of culture both used as a tool manipulated by the gay and lesbian movement and as a variable which conditions the political environment in which interest groups act. The purpose of the chapter is not to discount the validity of PPM; rather, it is to *augment* an already useful theoretical framework and to flesh out a description of the movement that, to this point, is perhaps too unidimensional and overly political. The goal is not, as has been done in the past, to propose a paradigm shift from the more structural political process model to a more culturally based understanding reminiscent of new social movement theories, but simply to provide a useful evaluative tool with another facet of analysis. Besides revealing how the movement fosters its own culture, maintaining its cohesiveness and sustainability relatively *independent* of political opportunity, the chapter also utilizes statistical and historical analysis to demonstrate that homophobia – the hatred and fear of homosexuals – is alive in both the United States and the United Kingdom, but to a lesser extent in the latter nation. This greater degree of cultural tolerance may be another reason why British national legal reform concerning gay equality has been more easily passed and promises to expand more readily in the future, given the election of a Labour majority.