

### History of Civil Rights Activism in America

The history of civil rights activism in America began with the ambitious standard of equality set by the founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence when they wrote, “[w]e hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”<sup>1</sup> In the past 240 years of American history, African Americans, immigrants, women, and LGBT people are four major groups who, having been denied full access to these unalienable rights, have put this standard of equality to test by fighting for their full rights of American citizenship through activism and advocacy. How historians tell their stories of civil rights activism tell different narratives of America. The “Progressive School” of historians claims that America has “tracked inexorably upward, toward an ever more perfectly democratic union,” placing the struggles of activism within the paradigms of American exceptionalism and excellence.<sup>2</sup> However, a progressive approach to the history of civil rights movements is not appropriate, because it oversimplifies the complexities of these movements which have not always been so net positively linear. An overview of the activist movements of African American and LGBT people through the periods of the early twentieth century, post-World War II, and the contemporary era, reveal that in each period, characterized by different social, economic, and political climates, these groups experienced both growth and setbacks in

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Const. Preamble.

<sup>2</sup> Kennedy, David M. “‘These United States,’ by Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Thomas J. Sugrue.” *The New York Times*. November 20, 2015.

their fight for the rights of American citizenship that challenge the applicability of a progressive historical approach to the narrative of their movements.

The late nineteenth to early twentieth century was a period of rapid modernization and industrialization which set the stage upon which African Americans continued to fight against the institutionalized racism that suppressed their rights long after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Formal slavery was quickly replaced with the rise and growth of other forms of economic, political, and cultural subjugation. The advent and commercialization of entertainment as a form of leisure in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century created powerful opportunities for cultural subjugation in the form of ideologically charged depictions of African Americans. Specifically, largely popularized minstrel shows characterized African Americans as subservient, dull-witted, and largely unfit for the roles and responsibilities of American citizenship.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, an important form of activism employed by African Americans in this period was representational activism. By using various artistic mediums of cultural expression to depict and characterize African American history from the African American perspective, artists sought to refactor the common image and connotations of African Americans in a positive light. Meta Warrick was African American sculptor commissioned to produce a series of dioramas for the 1907 Jamestown Exposition. In her “Negro Tableaux,” she portrayed African American progression in a novel way—as a linear narrative from enslavement to civilization—in which African Americans as actors in their own dramas of civilization and *progress*.<sup>4</sup> A few years later, in 1913, In 1913, W. E. B. Du Bois, an African American sociologist and civil rights leader, wrote a pageant called Star of Ethiopia, using theater to not only educate African Americans

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<sup>3</sup> Brundage, W. Fitzhugh. "Meta Warrick's 1907 “Negro Tableaux” and (Re) Presenting African American Historical Memory." *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Brundage, 1370.

about black history, but also to enlighten whites as to “reveal the negro... as human.”<sup>5,6</sup> Warrick and Du Bois sought to change the ideologically-charged and racist representations of African Americans in the fabric of American consciousness, through cultural activism that leveraged the popularity of the very representational outlets used against them to provide a counter-narrative of African American history and place in society. Despite the notable precedents that Du Bois and Warrick set for African American representation in the cultural domain in this era, racism and race relations will continue to surface as underlying suppressors of the attainment of full rights by African Americans in following eras.

The beginning of LGBT activism in America began in the context of the large cities that were the centers of modernization and industrialization of America at the turn of the century. As industry jobs attracted masses of young men from the countryside to large cities like New York and San Francisco, novel residential and commercial spaces provided gay men to interact and form communities. Most notably, in New York City, pockets of gay subcultures in which gay men directly participated in their ideal world, was a form of activism through demonstrating their rights to commercial spaces and the free market.<sup>7</sup> Y.M.C.A. residential centers became mega-centers of gay life, and a springboard from which gay men slowly repurposed the restaurants, bars, and clubs of the heterosexual world to build their “gay New York.”<sup>8</sup> However, the gay subculture grew under a cloud of growing repression, as the passing of laws that criminalized homosexual conduct as “degenerate disorderly conduct,” and increasing violence made it clear

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<sup>5</sup> Errol G. Hill, James V. Hatch. *A History of African American Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> "Star of Ethiopia." DuBoisopedia. December 18, 2013.

[http://scua.library.umass.edu/duboisopedia/doku.php?id=about:star\\_of\\_ethiopia](http://scua.library.umass.edu/duboisopedia/doku.php?id=about:star_of_ethiopia)

<sup>7</sup> Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, urban culture, and the making of the gay male world, 1890-1940*. Basic Books, 1994. pp. 155.

<sup>8</sup> Chauncey, 155.

that subculture on its own was not a sustainable form of gay rights activism.<sup>9</sup> The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a period of definition of gay identity through the community building enabled by new commercial spaces, as well as a period in which gay men tested the limits of gay expression in a largely homophobic society. The LGBT community in the larger Gay Liberation Movement of the late 1960s to mid 1980s, would later more strongly face the repression of conservative homophobic ideology, as activists became more vocal about gay rights.

Rising racial tensions during World War II erupted in the mass, organized period of African American civil rights activism characterized by its nonviolent methods known as *The Civil Rights Movement* of the 1950s and 1960s, which was succeeded in the late 60s and 70s by a contrasting “Black Power” movement. Even a cursory overview of the African American civil rights struggle of this broad WWII and post-WWII period reveal that battles won on the arenas of race relations and African American rights were measured wins, which were always subject to pushback linked to underlying racism. WWII racial tensions, called the “Negro Problem” stemmed from the outrage African Americans felt by the expectations for them to support the war against Hitler, whose “ideals of Aryan supremacy” were perceived as a threat to Western democracy, while yet back at home, white supremacy and segregation was still a large part of the Deep South.<sup>10</sup> While the federal government used famous African American athletes, such as heavyweight boxing champion G.I. Joe Lewis, as a cultural symbol and propaganda for both black and white Americans to ease race relations during the war,<sup>11</sup> by the 1950s, organized

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<sup>9</sup> Chauncey, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, pp. 55-76.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Rebecca Sklaroff, “Constructing G.I. Joe Louis: Cultural Solutions to the ‘Negro Problem’ during World War II,” *Journal of American History* (2002).

protests and boycotts led by organizations such as the NAACP moved African Americans into a new period of organized civil rights activism. The Civil Rights Movement was characterized by the advocacy methods of direct action protests, sit-ins, and legal victories, which eventually led to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which provided protection against discrimination under federal law. However, in the years following this legislation, the development of segregated cities, pattern of police brutality, and “race riots” continued to spread past the boundaries of the south. By the late 60s, growing dissatisfaction with the slow progress of non-violent activism in solving the systematic problems of racism, led to the development of a radicalized, “Black Power Movement,” which celebrated Black Nationalism, and promoted black self-determination. The Black Power movement identified that integration relied upon the good will of white Americans, and believed that a more effective way to secure their rights was to build up their own communities by participating in local electoral politics and providing social services for their communities, departing from Martin Luther King’s larger visions of unity.

In the post-World War II era, the turning point of LGBT civil rights activism was the Stonewall Riots, which marked the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement of the late 60s to mid 80s. The series of riots against police raids at the Stonewall Inn in New York in 1969, was the “coming out” of the LGBT community into the scene of civil rights activism. The Gay Liberation Movement was characterized by mass direct action methods of advocacy, an emphasis on self-assertion by means of coming out, and broadly challenging social stigmas surrounding gender and sexuality. The Gay Liberation movement took a drastic shift with the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s. The Regan administration was accused of delaying response to the growing epidemic of the virus which was first discovered in groups of gay men—allowing the

disease to needlessly spread and affect thousands.<sup>12</sup> The AIDS virus brought homophobia to light, inciting fear and a stigma associating the virus to gay men, which was devastating to the work of civil rights activist causes. However, The AIDS crisis did have positive implications for the future of LGBT activism. Jeff Levi, the executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force stated that, “[t]he goal prior to the AIDS crisis was to get the government out of our lives... [but] [n]ow, because of AIDS, we are asking the government to help save our lives,”<sup>13</sup> projecting the LGBT community onto a path of working within legal frameworks to advocate for their rights as American citizenship, a method that has seen some large successes in the contemporary period.

The cultural, political, and social climate of the contemporary period of American history, from the 90s to today, formed a new arena upon which African Americans and LGBT people continued to advocate for their rights. LGBT people fought for and saw great advancements in the last decade with regards to legislation passed to protect their rights and honor their history. From the historic victory of the Supreme court ruling of the constitutionality of same-sex marriage in 2015,<sup>14</sup> to the lifting of the Pentagon’s ban on transgender people serving openly in the military<sup>15</sup> and the establishment of Stonewall Inn as a National Monument by President Obama in 2016,<sup>16</sup> LGBT activists have won hard earned battles in the political realm. However, these advancements of LGBT rights have occurred in the context of a rise in

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<sup>12</sup> Holt, Nathalia. “AIDS at 30: Apathy plus HIV kills.” Los Angeles Times. April 21, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Morgan, Thomas. “Amid AIDS, Gay Movement Grows but Shifts.” The New York Times. October 10, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> De Vogue, Ariane and Diamond, Jeremy. “Supreme Court rules in favor of same-sex marriage nationwide.” CNN. June 27, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, Matthew. “Transgender People Will Be Allowed to Serve Openly in Military.” New York Times. June 30, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, Eli. “Stonewall Inn Named National Monument, a First for the Gay Rights Movement.” New York Times. June 24, 2016.

hate crimes against LGBT people, fueled by radical individuals who find the shifting culture deeply disturbing.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, the shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, left 50 dead and was the worst mass shooting in American history, a hate crime which speaks to the homophobia still rampant in America. Hate crimes and violence against African Americans have also brought questions of how deeply structures of racism exist in the fabric of America today. African American millennials rose to the civil rights activist scene in the contemporary period through using social media as a means of advocacy. The shooting of Michael Brown, an innocent 18-year old African American in Ferguson, Missouri, by law enforcement, sparked outrage in the African American community against police brutality. The trending hashtag #blacklivesmatter on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, created to spread awareness of police brutality, started the Black Lives Matter Movement, a continuation of the longer struggle of African American civil rights activism, rooted in, and suppressed by structural racism.<sup>18</sup>

The civil rights activist movements of women and immigrants through these three eras of American history, have mirrored these tides of progress and repression that the African American and LGBT movements faced, which resist a progressive approach to the telling of their histories. The Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was the product of post WWII social and economic changes and took root in consciousness raising groups where women identified that their common personal issues were political issues.<sup>19</sup> As women fought for better women's healthcare, the end of discrimination in the workplace, equal

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<sup>17</sup>Park, Haeyoun and Mykhyalshyn, Iaryna. "L.G.B.T. People Are More Likely to Be Targets of Hate Crimes Than Any Other Minority Group." *The New York Times*. June 16, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Hafner, Josh. "How Michael Brown's death, two years ago, pushed #BlackLivesMatter into a movement." *USA Today*. August 10, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Sarachild, Kathie, "A Program for Feminist "Consciousness-Raising"," in *The American Women's Movement, 1945-2000*, ed. Nancy MacLean. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009), 76.

pay for equal work, and the availability of childcare services, they made significant gains in securing more rights for women. However, advances in the Women's Liberation Movement have always been moderated by underlying patriarchal ideologies, enforced by male majorities in positions of power. The recent Stanford rape case sparked national outrage when the perpetrator of the rape, a white male, was given a light sentence for a serious sexual offence, drawing deep questions about how Brock Turner's intersection of race and class affected the outcome of this decision that had grave implications for the on-going fight against sexual violence against women.<sup>20</sup> Throughout American history, immigrants have been an instrumental part of the working class of America. From early immigrants of Eastern and Northern European origin in the industrial era to the large population of Mexican American immigrants today, working rights and legalization rights have been at the forefront of the activist movements of American immigrants. The Pullman Strikers of the railroad industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the farm workers in California, united under leadership of Cesar Chavez worked against economic structures to secure their rights to earn living wages and acceptable working conditions. The growing tensions of Mexican American immigrants today, particularly in the wake of an incoming presidential administration which claims to enforce strict immigration policies along the US-Mexico border, result from the fear of deportations and separation of families. Undocumented status is the denial of the rights of American citizenship, and its implications, especially for those brought to the United States as children, whose temporary status as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is threatened by the new administration, paint a picture

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<sup>20</sup> Stack, Liam. "Light Sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford Rape Case Draws Outrage." The New York Times. June 6, 2016.



of an America that contrasts our founding father's ideals of an America in which all men are created equal.

Case study of LGBT and African American activism, and a cursory overview of women and immigrant activism, through these three broad historical periods reveal that underlying ideologies such as racism, homophobia, and patriarchy in America limit the successes of these activist movements to the point where the history of these civil rights movements cannot be defined as strictly forward progressing. Progressive histories of these movements often imply that the civil rights movements end with passing of specific legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Supreme Court Ruling on the legality of same-sex marriage in 2015, however as seen in the discussion of the civil rights movements of African Americans and LGBT people, legislation changes often mark the beginning of true social change. An upward trending narrative of civil rights activism, effectively stops progress in the times where the continued fight for equal rights is needed the most. Hall, in "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" argues that the dominant, progressive narrative of the African American civil rights movement selected a version of the Civil Rights Movement which aided the right wing conservative political agenda.<sup>21</sup> By focusing on the non-violence of Martin Luther King, limiting segregation to the South, and pushing the idea that the end of the Jim Crow Laws established a "color blind society," the right argued that the government had no obligation to continue to pass legislation and work toward advancing African American civil rights by means of real systematic change after the Civil Rights Movement ended in the 1960s. By overlooking deeper, structural issues through selective telling of history, many of the root causes of racism were left to continue

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<sup>21</sup> Jacquelyn Down Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past" *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1237.

to this day. LGBT activism in America, comparatively younger than the African American civil rights movement in America, can learn from the African American civil rights movement to resist the pitfalls of a progressive telling of their history, and have already made strides in the writing of their history through the establishment of formal LGBT studies in academia.

The feedback loop between history and historiography with respect to civil rights activism, sets the stage for the trajectory of civil rights for the future of America. As Hall expresses, “the stories we tell about the civil rights movement matter,” and the goal of the historian should be to make civil rights harder to “simplify, appropriate, and contain.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, historians must avoid a progressive lens on civil rights activism, because simple up or down trajectories not only mask the complexities and struggles of these movements over time, but downplays the importance of marginalized groups to continue fighting for the full rights of American citizenship—the ideal set forth by our founding fathers. As America moves forward into unknown political territory with the election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States, all four major groups discussed—women, African Americans, immigrants, and LGBT people have expressed deep concern for the continuity of the hard-earned successes made in their respective activist movements, and each have experienced a resurgence of advocacy and action. The rise of the conservative right in the years to come will again promote a progressive telling of history, and the role of today’s historians and citizens must be to resist telling and propagating a progressive history of the civil rights movements of the past. A version of America that has not “tracked inexorably upward”<sup>23</sup>—an America that has *not* always been great—is still an America

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<sup>22</sup> Hall, pp. 1235.

<sup>23</sup> Kennedy (2015).

that is *good*, as long as women, immigrants, African Americans, LGBT people, and all other marginalized groups continue their fight to advocate for their full rights as American citizens.