

Rebel Friendships

What makes a social movement?

Eric Laursen

Social movements, not establishment reformers, have nurtured and propelled the most important liberatory struggles of the last half-century, from the Civil Rights and Gay Rights struggles to the Feminist Movement to Native American nations recent uprisings against fracking and pipelines.

Social movements create collective engagement, pockets of resistance that “reframe a politics of everyday life,” as activist and academic Ben Shepard writes in his recent book, *Rebel Friendships: “Outsider” Networks and Social Movements* (2015, Palgrave Macmillan), even as they gather support and ignite overwhelming demands for change.

These movements aren’t organized from the top down; sometimes they aren’t organized at all initially, because they grow out of networks of friends, neighbors, co-workers, victims, lovers, and ex-lovers. Sometimes they happen almost by accident, like the angry, passionate gay rights movement that emerged from Stonewall in 1969—but the people who made that movement knew each other, or at least recognized one another as a face at the other end of a bar.

These friendships are the essence of any society based on autonomy and self-organizing. Democracy—the kind anarchists Pyotr Kropotkin or Emma Goldman imagined, not the brand that passes for liberal or social democracy in the hands of a Hillary Clinton or Bernie Sanders—starts with individuals, communities, and the relationships and affinities that bring them together.

That’s why Goldman refused to separate personal and sexual liberation from the larger political struggle for peace, self-expression, and workers’ rights. Democracy had to involve something more than the freedom to sell one’s labor and vote a new set of masters into office every few years. It had to be powered by a radical intimacy that razed class, racial, and gender barriers and widened the boundaries of the democratic decisions we can now make into something unlimited.

Political organizing isn’t truly transformational unless it grows from radical friendships or helps to create them.

“A general outbreak of public resistance to militarism would contribute more to the removal of sexual imbalance than any action through the channels we have come to regard as political,” poet, biologist, and anarchist Alex Comfort suggested in 1949, as he was helping to launch the Ban the Bomb movement in the UK. Ban the Bomb would help birth a radical political culture in Britain in the 1960s and Comfort would go on to write *The Joy of Sex* in 1972, the first fully-illustrated, sex-positive, how-to guide to be carried in mainstream bookstores.

There are countless other examples. The farm workers’ movement of the same and succeeding decades grew out of the tight relationships, based on family, community, and technical knowledge that generations of grape harvesters developed in the American Southwest—quasi-communal and quite unlike the middle-class white communities that ignored and exploited them.

Radicalism repeatedly flourishes on college campuses, despite their role in cementing new generations of a ruling elite, because so many students, removed from the roles they accepted at home, begin to see the possibility of new kinds of relationships and communities.

Organizers in a range of social movements, from Black Lives Matter to the Occupy movement to the anti-WTO movement of a decade ago, can trace their activism to periods in their lives that took them out of themselves, sexually as well as politically.

Behind, or at the core of, each of these movements were friendships, between individuals and among small circles that widened out in various degrees of commitment. Shepard's book revisits the stories of some of the remarkable individuals who were the catalysts of these immensely significant communities of choice.

Eric Rofes, historian and one of the most important gay organizers in the post-Stonewall decades, was also a master networker whose work building a gay men's health movement pulled in and energized countless younger activists. "Rofes favored the notion of 'families of choice' as a method to create relationships that transcended the work of organizations or projects," Shepard writes.

There was New Yorker Bob Kohler, a veteran of both the Civil Rights Movement and Stonewall and a founder of the Gay Liberation Front and, later, the SexPanic! in the late 1990s. Kohler in turn was a mentor to Sylvia Rivera, who spent much of her life homeless, alcoholic, on drugs, or a combination of the three, but who was instrumental in pulling together a militant transgender movement in New York, decades before anyone had heard of Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner, through her legions of friends and acquaintances on the streets of the city.

More remarkable individuals and relationships burst out of the story of Time's Up!, the collective in which "friends clashed, fought, danced, and pushed the lines between public and private space within a burlesque of do-it-yourself street activism," as Shepard describes the group that organized New York's legendary bike rides.

Many Time's Up! activists helped import the nonhierarchical process of the group into the Occupy movement in 2011.

It's not always a pretty story. Feuds between friends whose relationships are pivotal to social movements have destroyed them, or nearly so. Kohler and Rivera's stormy friendship alone provides important lessons in how personal relationships can both galvanize and demoralize the people they inspire. Police understand well how social movements operate and are practiced at infiltrating and creating rifts between activists.

All the more reason why telling the story of these movements can be nearly as important as living them. Almost by definition, social movements generally don't keep phone logs, ledgers, or meeting notes or provide articles of incorporation. Much of the history that's passed on is oral. But the more we know, the better able we are to see trouble on the horizon, and respond.

Just as importantly, reclaiming these histories reawakens the radical impulses that lead to specific instances of change in society and helps us to see past the compromised, ever-narrower, self-serving and self-perpetuating organizations that the remnants of social movements so often congeal into when the movement begins to disintegrate.

Groups like ACT UP and Occupy deliberately set themselves up as networks of autonomous individuals and affinity groups, with a minimum of the professional infrastructure, financial hierarchy, and focus on self-perpetuation that's typical of the Nonprofit Industrial Complex.

They coalesce and then—but not always—disintegrate or burn out as the moment dictates, leaving room for other groups to rise up and take the struggle to the next stage. Often, their legacy is much more powerful than that of better-known, more careerist organizations: the latter can bring about reform, but social movements can engender new ways of being.

There's a pathos to the stories of social movements that mirrors human beings' struggles against isolation, often transitory attachments and attitudes, and the fleeting nature of life itself. "Loss is part of modern living," Shepard writes. "Many find themselves isolated from communities, sitting and looking at computers, and isolated from their own labor. Friends come and disappear; modern living is an ongoing loss exercise. Struggling against isolation, movements build cultures of their own. Here the intersection of friendship, harm reduction, and support make participation in social movements feel authentic. New ideas and innovations take shape through this mix of bodies, actions, and ideas."

Social movements are sometimes caricatured as cliques and subcultures. And while subcultures can sometimes be exclusionary and inward-looking, they can also save the lives of the many isolated individuals who find refuge in them. Accounts of funerals and end-of-life support groups punctuate Rebel Friendships, underscoring the en-

during nature of the personal ties between veterans of social movements and also the strong organizing impact of the AIDS epidemic.

On the brighter side, sometimes friendships are more than just that. Sex can play a role in organizing as well. “Sex and friendship were not opposed or linked,” Shepard writes, echoing Foucault; “the ties between the two fostered communities of care and pleasure.”

Shepard devotes a great deal of space in his book to the rise of LGBTQ activism and the social movements that grew out of it, in part because he participated himself, but also, arguably, because they play a critical role in the development of all social movements of the past 40 years, at least in the U.S.

Community, in the queer world, is almost by necessity intentional—much more so than in conventional heterosexual society. Friendships, physical and otherwise, are vital to the community’s existence, and so a great many object lessons and examples of how to organize social movements can be gleaned from the decades of politically aware LGBTQ life—lessons in civility, respect, mutual support and care, and the importance of solidarity with other struggles against other oppressions.

Shepard makes a strong case that a fairly direct line runs from Stonewall to Time’s Up! and Reclaim the Streets, to the campaigns against corporate globalization and the Occupy movement, among many others. Urban movements of resistance that organize in the face of a power structure insistent on not just ignoring them but negating their existence, they popped up often unexpectedly, never in exactly the same place twice, in a kind of ongoing guerrilla war against injustice and their own oppression and marginalization.

Like all social movements, they drew strength from an implicit utopianism and the promise of personal as well as political liberation. The marrow of much of their history—and their future—is the role played by the individuals, couples, and knots of friends and lovers who help to catalyze them.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/397-winter-2017/rebel-friendships>
Fifth Estate #397, Winter, 2017

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net