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### **ACT UP- The AIDS Revolution**

Over the course of the 1980s, AIDS became a prominent social, political, and human issue. With each passing year, the disease spread, leaving behind a trail of death, fear, and hopelessness. In particular, the gay population suffered greatly at the hands of this modern-day plague. The community was in a state of disarray and no one was assuming leadership and others outside the community, i.e., the government, and scientific/medical community were avoiding or demonizing the issue of AIDS. Amidst this climate, gays and lesbians began mobilizing against the disease by creating organizations such as the Gay Men's Health Crisis, an ad hoc volunteer organization, but even these could not fully support the needs of the community or bring about the necessary changes in the social, political, and ideological struggle of AIDS. By 1987, nothing substantial had been done by the government, in terms of spurring public health policies, or the scientific community, in terms of accessing medicine or alternative routes of dealing with the disease. The Reagan administration had up until this point systematically cut funding for health agencies, and had especially decentralized the role of the national government. Such being the case, the Reagan administration had done very little to combat the disease, something that really played a large role in the spread of AIDS, even though its spread could have been halted if attention and resources had been devoted to studying and halting the disease. To combat all this complacency on part of the government, the indifference on part of the medical and scientific community, and to unify the fragmented gay community, an organization called ACT UP was created in 1987. ACT UP or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power emerged in New York City under the

leadership of Larry Kramer. Instantaneously the organization attracted a large diverse following and for the first few years of its existence it actively challenged the social, political, economical, and societal transmutations of AIDS.

This paper will try to examine the circumstances which led to the creation of this organization and analyze the major contributions made by ACT UP NY to help those affected by AIDS. From its inception and later establishment in cities across the U.S. and the world, its various actions were reminiscent of the radicalism of the post-Stonewall era. I will specifically be focusing on ACT UP New York and how it markedly changed the perception of the role of government, politics and society in dealing with the AIDS crisis. By analyzing ACT UP during the period from its birth in 1987 and ending in 1993, it will be possible to see how ACT UP used grass-roots mobilization to attract a vibrant and impassioned following. Furthermore, analyzing it over the defining years of its existence will enable us to understand the socio-political ramifications of AIDS as a disease but also as a cultural, economic and religious issue in American society. At its heart, ACT UP's protests, demonstrations, media savvy tactics and a radical approach allowed it to attract the thousands of individuals who felt disenfranchised. Examining the rise of the organization will also highlight how ACT UP went through an internal change where it lost its radicalism through the infighting among members, the decline of volunteer participation, formation of splinter groups, all of which destroyed the momentum of the organization. This progression from a radical fringe of society to becoming a more conformist organization highlights not only how the organization evolved but also the stance of AIDS in American society.

## **Early History:**

By analyzing the work of scholars, historians, and writers it is possible to see how the disease evolved and the response it received from society. This analysis of the history before the emergence of ACT UP brings forth the fragmentation and lack of political activism within the community something, which ACT UP would later on address by cultivating its unique socio-political response to the AIDS epidemic. By 1981, patients were flooding large urban hospital centers complaining of countless illnesses which were odd if anything considering the age, demographics or medical histories of the patients. Despite the outbreak of a peculiar and as of then unnamed disease the gay community was enjoying a period of social and political growth because the community had fought for its rights to exist as a part of society. Steven Steidman, in "Transfiguring Sexual Identity: AIDS and the Contemporary Construction of Homosexuality" talks about the initial skepticism of this emerging disease. He asserts "by the early 1980s the conservative offensive against gay people appeared to be losing momentum" (Steidman, p 189). However, the epidemic proportions of the spread of AIDS and the lack of medical or scientific data to combat the disease led to the mischaracterization of AIDS as a "gay disease." Such an association revived the pre-1980s sentiments where the religious right reinvigorated and antigay politics began to infiltrate politics once again (Steidman, p 189). Slowly, AIDS began to lose its medical percepts, instead politicians and religious leaders began politicizing the disease to support their agendas.

This politicization of AIDS created a chasm of controversy for the gay community, because with each death, the gay community was being turned into a community of "socially deviant" and "corrupt" individuals. Steidman states "AIDS was

being used to advocate changes in homosexual identity and behavior" (Steidman, p 190). Furthermore, the heterosexual construction of AIDS as a "gay disease" despite evidence to the contrary, began a smearing campaign of gay rights and freedoms, which the community had fought very hard for over the years (Steidman, p 191). The restrictions and stereotypes placed on gay individuals were not only factors of demoralization but also a means by which gays were being stripped of their rights. From the associations to its spread, even AIDS was originally called GRID<sup>1</sup>. By the end of 1982, scientists had begun debating the causes of AIDS and the initial theories: the "Overload theory" and the "gay lifestyle theory" highlighted how the scientific and medical communities played on social/religious biases to construct the AIDS epidemic. During the early years one fact substantively hampered a cohesive response to AIDS, that being the lack of media attention. Much of ACT Ups actions from 1987-1993 would be crafted as so to increase the level of media attention and thus shed light on ACT Ups reason for protesting something. Many historians, including Steidman point out that the media was negligent in reporting the facts, going further to state that "mass media constructed the very reality of AIDS by drawing selectively on medical data and framing this information in a non-medical interpretive schema" (Steidman, p 191). He asserts that gays were being pressured into assuming "moral weight of individual responsibility and guilt" for their actions which neither helped prevent the spread of AIDS, nor was useful for the community in its greatest time of crisis (Steidman, p 197). Steidman shows that gay

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<sup>1</sup> GRID refers to Gay Related Immunodeficiency Disease. Terms such as *GRID* (gay-related immunodeficiency disease) were considered but rejected in favor of the more neutral *AIDS*.<sup>134</sup> The CDC promulgated a broad surveillance definition of what it called acquired immunodeficiency syndrome to facilitate the reporting and investigation of this new syndrome. (Shilts, 1987).

culture was being attacked by the mass media, while simultaneously being criminalized by the medical community, which greatly perpetuated "AIDS hysteria."

This "AIDS hysteria" negatively impacted gays and lesbians. By identifying the disease with gays and lesbians directly, many of them felt victimized and castigated by society, which translated into ambivalence about their self-worth and their stance in society. Deborah Gould, a historian and scholar, highlights the level of ambivalence among gays in, "Life During Wartime: Emotions and the Development of ACT UP," about their homosexuality and about dominant U.S. society (Gould, p 683). Her analysis of the situation mirrors Steidman, because she asserts that AIDS was slowly demoralizing the gay community, and placing many gays in a state of indecisiveness where they faced internal demons when AIDS was termed a result of gay sexual habits and externally the alarming spread of the disease to other members of society began the social stigmatization of AIDS as a product of gay culture and practices. Gould states, "AIDS greatly magnified the stigma of homosexuality, intensifying lesbians' and gay men's shame about their sexual practices and anxieties about social rejection" (Gould, p 684). This rejection Gould hints at was further heightened by the mass media, which either ignored the crisis or sensationalized it by promoting skewed analysis of how AIDS was spread, who was at risk for getting it and what could individuals do to protect themselves. However, no one asked what was the government doing to prevent the spread of AIDS? The questions which ACT UP would bring up in later years basically questioned the same ideas. The continued perception of AIDS as a "gay disease" nurtured a level of indifference within the community, nonetheless many individuals began to mobilize and educate themselves, as in the case of GMHC or just accept the representations as facts because of the endorsements

of the political, medical and scientific institutions of the time.

The early days of the crisis are highlighted in And the Band Played On, by Randy Shilts. He meticulously details how AIDS was given unrestrained freedom to become an epidemic stating:

"In those early days the federal government viewed AIDS as a budget problem, local public health officials saw it as a political problem, gay leaders considered AID a public relations problem, and the news media regarded it as a homosexual problem that wouldn't interest anyone else. Consequently few confronted AIDS for what it was a profoundly threatening medical crisis" (Shilts, p xxii).

His examination of the media, scientific/medical community, and the federal government shows that none of these entities did their part to prevent the AIDS crisis from escalating. Like Gould and Steidman before him Shilts analyzes the epidemiology and the social response to AIDS during the 1980s. Besides the negligence of the media, the nonchalant government left the issue of dealing with the disease up to the states and with a general lack of knowledge or extensive public awareness of the disease, AIDS was cloaked in a web of social taboos. Since AIDS had emerged in a group classified as a social minority, it lost its medical definition, instead of being a disease which caused human beings to suffer greatly, became a disease of the socially excluded, the gays and lesbians, and later on the drug abusers and other social outcasts. The religious right now under full leadership under President Reagan, whose American values platform had helped him win by a landslide in the 1980s, used this opportunity to impact the social arena and promote "Christian beliefs" through religious rhetoric which attacked AIDS and demonized the gay community. Some in the religious circles even created a new description for the word gay, which for them asked the question "Got AIDS Yet?" Such blatant attacks on the gay community angered many and created internal rifts among the gays and lesbians. After some time, Shilts

asserts that gay culture, which endorsed sexual freedom, was a factor in the transmission of AIDS because of the rampant promiscuity, the lack of preventative care during sex and other factors, any person in the gay community who initiated talk of regulating the bathhouses, or practicing safer sex was seen as a supporter of denigrating gay rights and freedoms. The gay community was being broken apart internally due to AIDS but as previously seen at the hands of malicious attacks by religious leaders, conservative pundits and facing a nonchalant government which seemed uninterested in safe guarding the welfare of its citizens.

The negative attitudes of AIDS also stymied any scientific efforts from uncovering the origins of the disease. Shilts point out that any scientist who tried to conduct research on the disease faced two battlefronts: a baffling disease and the indifference of science, government, mass media, most gay leaders, and public health officials (Shilts, p.171). Unfortunately, the lack of media attention truly halted any concrete action to highlight the plight of the victims. For instance, the New York Times, one of the most influential newspapers of that time, only ran two stories on the so called “Gay Syndrome” by the 1982 (Shilts, p. 110). By Thanksgiving 1981, “244 were known to be dead [from AIDS]” whereas by 1982 over “1,123 had died of AIDS” (Crimp, p. 11). Not only had people died by 1982 but AIDS was gaining serious momentum, but nothing was made of any new developments. The media implicitly was allowing AIDS to kill more people by not bringing attention to the disease, the inefficient national/state health policy and insufficient allocation of funds for the CDC and NIH<sup>2</sup>. However, there were clear

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<sup>2</sup> CDC and NIH are acronyms for the Center for Disease Control and prevention and the National Institute of Health respectively. Both these organizations faced severe federal level budget cuts which hampered their response to the AIDS epidemic. These organizations would also become a target for ACT UP during the

examples in American history where diseases such as Legionnaire's disease or Toxic shock syndrome <sup>3</sup> had elicited an almost immediate governmental, scientific, and media response. Instead of bringing attention to the disease, the media played a significant role in increasing the stigmatization of gays and lesbians, which painted them as the carriers of AIDS. As Steidman pointed out this, gross mischaracterization of AIDS as the "gay disease", "gay syndrome", "homosexual disease" all led people to ignore the epidemic proportions of this retroviral disease as a human disease.

By the time AIDS was gaining some attention, the gay community was breaking apart with different factions forming in New York and San Francisco. Shilts extensively details the internal strife of the gay community since AIDS was breaking it apart internally.

Various factions within the community wanted different responses to the disease. Even here adequate prominent media attention would have brought forth some sort of change.

The internal fragmentation did not help gays and lesbians because this further alienated the community not only from the larger spectrum of society but also within its own confines of existence. ACT UP would greatly reduce this internal fragmentation during the

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early 1990s. Both these organizations were very large and bureaucratic, where little was done to halt the growing pandemic of AIDS.

<sup>3</sup> Legionnaires' disease is a type of pneumonia caused by bacteria. The first recognized outbreak occurred on July 27, 1976 at the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where members of the American Legion, a United States military veterans association, had gathered for the American Bicentennial. Within two days of the event's start, veterans began falling ill with a then-unidentified pneumonia. Numbers differ, but perhaps as many as 221 people were given medical treatment and 34 deaths occurred. At the time, the U.S. was debating the risk of a possible swine flu epidemic, and this incident prompted the passage of a national swine flu vaccination program. That cause was ruled out, and research continued for months, with various theories discussed in scientific and mass media that ranged from toxic chemicals to terrorism (domestic or foreign) aimed at the veterans. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention mounted an unprecedented investigation and soon thereafter the cause of the disease was identified. Similarly, Toxic Shock syndrome a fatal disease which gained prominence in the 1970s acquired a lot of media attention and with the needed research money it was prevented from spreading.

early years. This level of intolerance within the community adversely affected the creation of any cohesive response to the crisis. Dorothy Nelkin, a regarded cultural analyst and writer asserts, the internal prejudice among gays and lesbians further demoralized gays and shows how the media as a whole "...tend (tended) to avoid issues (such as AIDS) that would threaten prevailing social, moral, or economic values." Tied to a stagnant media, the political environment of the United States also contributed to the the lukewarm response AIDS garnered in political circles. However, creating any policies or even allocating funds would have involved raising awareness about the ramifications of AIDS. The aforementioned could only happen if the government was active and willing to tackle the gross injustices faced by the gays and various other groups in the United States.

As AIDS continued to destroy the lives of thousands of Americans the media in what can be termed minimal attention did begin to mobilize around the issue through the creation of "newspegs."<sup>4</sup> Only after AIDS began to ascend into the heterosexual community did the media begin devoting extensive amount of coverage for the disease. However, ACT UP would greatly change the scope of the media in the AIDS crisis by employing the media to spread its message. The demonstrations and various other campaigns initiated by ACT UP used the media to raise awareness about the disease but also highlighted how media attention could spur changes in policy and governmental participation in stopping the epidemic. But before ACT UP came to being, another

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<sup>4</sup> Nelkin uses the term "newspeg" to describe how the media sensationalized news related to AIDS. These stories sensationalized news about the disease perpetuated the bias surrounding it and generally painted unfavorable caricatures of gays and lesbians. In terms of getting attention in the media, as mentioned before, many organizations avoided the issue completely or offered a distorted view of the crisis. For instance, the earliest reporting of AIDS in the Wall Street Journal happened when AIDS began appearing in women and heterosexual men (Shilts, p. 126).

organization began to change the scope of AIDS in society by challenging the norms characterizing gays and lesbians and internal mobilization.

This organization, aptly titled, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) internally mobilized the gay community and in many regards set the foundations for the creation of ACT UP. GMHC began in 1981 in New York City after the first few cases of the then mysterious illness afflicted gays in the city. The primary organizer of GMHC was Larry Kramer- a community activist and writer- who began hosting self-education classes at his Manhattan apartment and slowly these weekly self-education classes developed into GMHC. GMHC grew as AIDS slowly infiltrated each part of the social spectrum and this growth showed the increasing needs of the gay community as AIDS continued to spread. GMHC initiated a wide spectrum of program such as AIDS hotline, research committees, visiting services, homecare aside from providing education and direct services to persons affected by the illness. The organization also fought for the rights of AIDS victims by fighting for the use of acronym PWA or Person with AIDS instead of assigning a specific title as homosexual, hemophilic or prostitute. Socially, AIDS degraded the victim's sense of being, because he/she became a symbol for something ugly, hated and feared. Thus, a title of PWA<sup>5</sup> allowed the victim to retain a sense of self and dignity. AIDS must be understood as a medical but equally as a socio-political disease. Since the gay community

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<sup>5</sup> The People With AIDS (PWA) Self-Empowerment Movement was a movement of those diagnosed with AIDS and grew out of San Francisco. The PWA Self-Empowerment Movement believes that those diagnosed as having AIDS should "take charge of their own life, illness, and care, and to minimize dependence on others". The attitude that exists throughout the movement is that one should not assume that their life is over and will end soon solely because they have been diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. This was championed by GMHC as the official title for referring to AIDS victims (Kobasa, p. 284-245)

lacked any central help agency unlike many disease related hotlines or therapy groups, GMHC began an advice hotline, counseling services, hospice care- which included visiting PWAs, delivering food and medicine, spending leisurely time with the PWA-and most importantly GMHC assumed the role of education and health policy issues within and outside the gay community. Suzanne C. Ouellete Kobasa, in her piece, “AIDS and Volunteer associations: Perspectives on Social and Individual Change” analyzes the growth of GMHC and its crucial role in “detailing the gaps and shortfalls in service provisions for the gay community and PWAs” (Kobasa, p. 283). Kobasa accurately asserts that GMHC began the initial steps to responding to the failure of then “...existing hospitals, welfare, and social institutions” (Kobasa, p. 285). Much of GMHC’s actions and directives were service oriented, they did not seek to eliminate the disparities, which were depriving gays and lesbians from getting any sort of help from their government.

GMHC also heavily relied on volunteers for its many services. The organization raised funds and held events at local hot spots in New York area, distributed pamphlets and other educational materials at parties to attract people to the organization. As Kobasa suggests, GMHC appealed to the gay community because for the first time since the inception of AIDS, gays and lesbians had an opportunity to show their abilities as caretakers for their own, which translated into them being looked upon as responsible individuals. The sense of drive and purpose afforded by GMHC to its volunteers, who worked hands on with the patients and people in charge to pioneer new ways to reach people with a positive message, truly was different from the constant depiction as socially deviant individuals spreading the new manifestation of the plague. In addition, GMHC also began a process of collecting information on the scientific and medical aspects of the

disease as to remain updated with the latest news in the scientific communities across the globe. However, despite its resources and support network, the organization remained politically inactive. Since, GMHC was more oriented towards building a positive platform for the gay community. Kobasa states, its “apolitical” nature made it less threatening to deal with in larger society whereas ACT UP was rude, rash and wholly unapologetic for its demonstrations. The volunteer organization was not attacking any specific institution or individual but it was focusing on how things could be improved for PWAs.

Unlike ACT UP, which called for systematic change in the government’s handling of AIDS, GMHC championed more conformist ideals many of which incorporate the thinking of 19<sup>th</sup> century sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville.<sup>6</sup> Although voluntary organizations such as GMHC tried to champion causes such as “risk reduction”, health education and raising funds for AIDS related services, these organizations lacked political inclinations and this severely limited their scope. As the number of HIV/AIDS cases increased by 1983 GMHC had offered its type of social services to PWAs by raising public awareness and public health education in the gay community (Shilts, p. 239). Interestingly, the “apolitical” nature of GMHC would play a huge role in establishing GMHC as a source for AIDS information and a small but important insight into the gay community. As the AIDS epidemic progressed and more parties- the media, government, medical/scientific community- began to get involved with the AIDS crisis they turned to

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<sup>6</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville specified the role of voluntary organizations. He asserts that a voluntary organization served as an auxiliary to the government, it served a need in the community, and it relied on individual effort to sustain itself. More importantly, it remains uninvolved with the political process and is concerned more with proving needed services. Kobasa assertion rings true when she states, the organization remained “...largely an ad hoc organization without a historical and political agenda...serving a nonpolitically defined community...” (Kobasa, p.284).

GMHC for its "...comments and interpretations on AIDS developments..." (Kobasa, p.287).

Aside from its voluntary role, GMHC was involved with education, policy assessment, and advocacy for AIDS victims, and their treatment. GMHC accomplished some major feats considering the lack of cohesiveness within the gay community. It is very important to note that GMHC helped cultivate a volunteer base which would later be heavily involved with ACT UP. GMHC shed light on the sympathetic and emotional response of the gays and lesbians. It is very important to understand that this organization was solely based on volunteer efforts, which made time in their lives to answer phone calls, present public education forums, visit PWAs, make public policy recommendations and generally educate people about the AIDS epidemic. GMHC helped unify the gay community as it is shown through its successful fund raisers at various venues in New York City during the early 1980s. It also began the process by which gays and lesbians could reassert their roles in society and show their humanity which had been greatly attacked with the rise of the epidemic. However, GMHC with all its momentum and resources was unable to systematically tackle the problems facing the gay community. The organization did not hold the government accountable for its lack of involvement with the crisis.

Furthermore, GMHC remained involved with social change on a micro level, where it dealt with individuals and the daily existence of gay people. It initiated small scale changes and many policy changes such as the use of the term PWA, or increased public education and awareness campaigns and many voluntary efforts. It is interesting to note that the government became particularly involved with GMHC where it began

representing the community at policy forums, pharmaceutical meetings and other political venues. The non-threatening organization was heavily involved with the formation of the defunct Presidential commission and mandatory testing for AIDS, both of which further aided its institutionalization and formalization as an auxiliary organization for the government (Kobasa, p. 289). However, the gay community still lacked access to fundamental resources in combating the AIDS crisis, the fragmentation of the gay community, the complacency of the government, and the indecisiveness of the medical/scientific community.

Aside from the creation of GMHC, another event markedly changed the perception of AIDS in American society. Rock Hudson, a Hollywood Icon, died in 1985 from an AIDS related illness, his sudden death sparked great amount of interest in AIDS. Ironically, many media outlets ignored the AIDS crisis before Hudson's death because it was a problem of the social outcasts. However, the death of this one aged Hollywood star brought more forth more attention and outcries of governmental inaction than the deaths of thousands of gays and lesbians, and countless hemophiliacs, drug users and women. The selective reporting carried out by prominent news outlets such as the New York Times, stymied public awareness of the disease. Upon its formation ACT UP would target the lack of public knowledge of the crisis in terms of the number of deaths caused by the disease, or the actions of the government to curb the needless deaths. Hudson's death created a domino effect where people became aware of the disease and the long silence around the disease was beginning to be shattered.

The gay disease was now visible in the heterosexual community. Shilts states, this one death changed how AIDS was perceived in the gay and heterosexual community and

provided many within the gay community the desire to create change and attract attention to their plight. After all how many more people had to die or lose their loved ones at the hands of AIDS before the government would do something to fund research, or raise public awareness about the disease. By 1987, when ACT UP emerged over 20,000 Americans had died due to contracting the HIV/AIDS virus (Nelkin, p. 298).

During this time of crisis, ACT UP would come into existence and immediately spur social change. However, its actions need to analyze in terms of their historical context to see how ACT UP was reinvigorating gay radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s. The AIDS crisis had clearly broken down the gay community and organizing any movement which was inclusive of all fringes within the community was extremely difficult but conversely AIDS provided the needed crisis for the gay community to band together and fight the disease as a medical/scientific issue, as a political/economical issue, and mainly as a human issue. Where GMHC had begun this unification of the community, even it could not sustain continued membership as the crisis evolved.

In his book, Gay Power- An American Revolution, David Eisenbach talks about the evolution of the gay community and his analysis details the formation of the GAA and the GLF, radical organizations which ushered in a new age of gay activism and radicalism after the Stonewall riot. The Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) was founded in New York City in December of 1969 in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots. Its founders were dissident members of the Gay Liberation Front who “sought to form a militant, non-violent organization dedicated exclusively to the attainment of civil and social rights for gays.” Its ultimate goal was "to secure basic human rights, dignity, and freedom for all gay people" (Eisenbach, p. 96). Open to all persons in the metropolitan area regardless of

sexual orientation the GAA<sup>7</sup> quickly achieved recognition as a leader in the gay liberation movement. By rallies, demonstrations, picketing, sit-ins, and what it called "zaps"--the unexpected confrontation with persons in power--it sought to dramatize its cause, and to convince those in positions of authority of the need for taking immediate steps to end specific instances of legal, economic and political oppression of gays. Similarly, the GLF or the Gay Liberation Front formed after the Stonewall Riots. Unlike GAA, the GLF was more radical in its approach, practicing such things as "outings."<sup>8</sup> However, the GLF had more expansive goals which in addition to focusing on gay rights, "essentially criticized American values and society in general, and became involved with other causes and social movements, including the anti-war and civil rights movements, and the fight to end racism and bigotry" (Eisenbach, p. 90). ACT UP can be considered a hybrid of both organizations because it was expansive yet also focused narrowly on gay male issues. In establishing the composition and workings of ACT UP, it will be easier to gauge the similarities and differences between the various organizations. The Stonewall riots<sup>9</sup> became the historic

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<sup>7</sup> During its most active period (1970-74) the GAA lobbied vigorously for the enactment of fair employment and housing legislation, for the repeal of state laws respecting sodomy and solicitation, and for the banning of police entrapment and harassment of gays. It also sought to encourage the development of a new gay culture free from the habitual constraints and role playing forced upon gays by a sexist society. At its headquarters, the "Firehouse", on Wooster Street in Greenwich Village it sponsored dances, cabarets, film and fashion shows, musical and theatrical events and consciousness-raising meetings.

<sup>8</sup> The 'outing' refers to the practice of disclosing someone's sexual orientation against their will, in order to gain political advantage or humiliate the other individual.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to that summer there was little public expression of the lives and experiences of gays and lesbians. The Stonewall Riots marked the beginning of the gay liberation movement that has transformed the oppression of gays and lesbians into calls for pride and action. The Stonewall Inn itself was run by the mob, and under its protection, the Inn served a mainly gay clientele. The bar was home to a host of illegal activities which ultimately were helping the mafia extort and illegally accumulate funds from people. The raid was "a part of a strategy to ruin a Mafia dive that was blackmailing gay patrons and defrauding banks out of millions of dollars." Despite this intention, the raid became an epic battle between the gays and armed police forces. The aftermath of the riot greatly redefined the community and on Friday evening, June 27, 1969, the New York City tactical police's raid which usually encountered little resistance erupted into

landmark for the gay community and it greatly changed how gays and lesbians saw themselves and their stance in society. The legislations endorsed by the activists of this time set how gays were treated and greatly increased their stance in society.

Eisenbach argues ACT UP's brand of radicalism was not a new creation but came to prominence because of the precedents set up by the previous decade's gay liberation movement. Thus, many of ACT UP's ideologies, actions and social display of emotional backlash, though markedly different from the GLF and GAA were in fact he bases for many of ACT UP's tactics. Interestingly, many of the members of ACT UP in its early years were people who had grown up during the Stonewall Era; they had experiences of what life was like for gays and lesbians in the America, they had fought vigorously to fight the injustices levied upon them by the government. Thus, ACT UP's turn towards radicalism is not surprising since many of its founding members were in fact the members of GAA, GLF or other gay activism organization a decade ago.

### **ACT UP- time to do something**

“End in anger, I say, because it is only sane to rage against the dying light, because strategically anger is the political response, because psychologically anger displaces despondency and because existentially anger lightens the solitude of the frightened individual” (White, 1987)

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violent protest as the crowds in the bar fought back. The backlash and several nights of protest that followed come to signify the “de-invisibilization” of the gay community and set precedent for future generations of gays and lesbians (Eisenbach, p. 87-114).

ACT UP came into existence in the March of 1987, in response to a speech by Larry Kramer<sup>10</sup> at New York's Gay and Lesbian Community Center (Crimp, p.14). A little excerpt from the speech highlights its potent message, Kramer stated, "...I have never been able to understand why for six long years we have sat back and let ourselves literally be knocked out man by man." Kramer's speech highlights the emotional context, which brought forth the notion of ACT UP and it is important to understand that ACT UP employed the use of emotions to unify itself. The mission statement of the organization read, "ACT UP is a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis." With this as the foundation of the organization, it used the emotion of anger to fuel its members and as the mantra for its actions. Unlike the service oriented organizations which failed to use their resources to combat the government and drug companies ACT UP would initiate broad level changes by channeling the frustration and grief felt by gays and lesbians and focusing it in the form of social action, civil disobedience, and political activism. The response generated by this diverse group was a mixture of many different ideas employing art, words, symbols, theatrics and other means to execute demonstrations that were media events. The initial lack of attention the media gave to the crisis soon changed into increased attention for ACT UP, as it protested and organized rallies against political leaders such as New York City Mayor Ed. Koch, or protested the Wellcom Pharmaceutical company, or as it protested the New York Times.

The gay community by this moment had lost upwards of 20,000 individuals and President Reagan had not uttered the words AIDS in the seven years of his term. With

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<sup>10</sup> Larry Kramer was an author, playwright, activist and the founding person for both GMHC and ACT UP. He championed political activism and his philosophies greatly impacted ACT UP.

such a level of disregard and blatant lack of care, gays and lesbians felt slighted by their politicians, and also community leaders who had not been able to do anything substantial to alleviate their problems. As Kramer stated, ACT UP was the force which would destroy the sense of quietism surrounding AIDS, it would bring forth the needed contingencies and fight for the rights of the gays and lesbians suffering at the hands of AIDS. In essence, ACT UP was as much a radical movement as a source of empowerment and source of self-pride for many gays and lesbians who felt alienated, frustrated and constrained by society and their own community. As former member of the organization, Jon Greenberg states,

“We do demonstrations and act in such a way that the authorities (and in this case we mean government, officials, researchers, politicians, the church and the law) feel is inappropriate but ultimately accomplishes our goal by bringing into focus the problems which they are unwilling or afraid to address” (ACT UP website Jon Greenberg- ACT UP Explained)

Many historians have analyzed ACT UP during the time frame of its formation. In essence, ACT UP used emotions in generating its response. Robert Ariss, a social researcher states the organization heightened the fear of reprisal, preventing people from voicing their feelings on AIDS. Similarly Greenberg states, ACT UP allowed PWAs and people without AIDS the opportunity to let go of their fears and use their anger to accomplish external<sup>11</sup> and internal goals<sup>12</sup> set forth by the organization.

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<sup>11</sup> External goals refer to the actual demonstration, which details how the members utilized their banners and signs, and yelling and people marching around looking angry and getting angry to espouse change. Accomplishing these goals required participating in some sort of illegal activity which demonstrators do in order to get arrested. These arrests usually fell under the realm of civil disobedience so the members who were arrested did not spend a lot of time in jail, either they were bailed out or served their sentence. The demonstration serves to embarrass those who ACT UP protests against and gives them the excuse needed to implement the programs they might have otherwise not implemented. These goals are on display for the public (Jon Greenberg- ACT UP explained).

Where as GMHC was an auxiliary organization for the government, with "... (limited) political channels between itself, and the government...and the political climate is less conducive to change" (Ariss, p. 28). ACT UP basically set out to create new power relations by "...exploiting the media's penchant for spectacle by transforming gay male rage over AIDS into various forms of street theater" (Corber, p. 392). This turn towards collectivism also masks the internal organization of ACT UP, which promoted unity and lacked any hierarchal divisions reminiscent of the women's and gays movements of the 1970s. The organization did not set forth any concrete leadership positions and mainly ran in democratic form.

ACT UP had a singular vision of change, which tried to reclaim the AIDS epidemic and empower the victims of the disease to advocate for themselves. Ariss notes that ACT UP gave those individuals i.e. gay men, lesbians, ethnic minorities, and others who had been excluded from the formal decision making structures. Notwithstanding the level of inclusion, ACT UP remained fairly insulated in terms of contact with the various groups it represented. In their analysis of ACT UP, social scientists M. Kent Jennings and Ellen Ann Anderson describe ACT UP as an organization which was built upon "...political distrust, personal suffering [and] ideological intensity..."(Jennings & Anderson, pg. 311). ACT UP was ready to fight and accomplish its goals by any means necessary. Unlike volunteer organizations or other service oriented agencies, ACT UP did not seek to just mediate and reconcile with the government, instead it sought to make the

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<sup>12</sup> Internally, an ACT UP demonstration serves another function, that of empowerment which gave people a way to uncover their self-power by giving the people the structure and opportunity they need to work through their obstacles to empowerment. In addition, work through their anger and use it to combat their fears (Jon Greenberg, ACT UP explained).

government hear the concerns of the people, and make necessary changes to accommodate their needs. The late 1980s then became a symbolic ode to the 1960s radicalism, where once again, gays and lesbians for fighting for prominence because only through getting the attention could they make any headway in terms of public/health policy, governmental assistance, research and patient advocacy. This mantra of immediate and fundamental change was very significant because achieving this singular vision ACT UP challenged many of the existing social, political, economical, and religious norms, making it inherently radical in its approach towards getting concrete results.

It can be observed through analysis of ACT UP's demonstrations that it was not so much politically active but more of an organization which purposefully pushed certain agendas and promoted distinct notions of what should happen as a result of its countless protests, zaps, political rallies, sit-ins, and various other political and social gatherings. The ACT UP agenda was more of a call to war in some sense because the organization utilized emotional pain as a source of making people to arms. Before long, ACT UP's ideas began to gather momentum and soon the rallies which were staged all across New York City began to make a more concerted impact on the residents of New York.

The first three years of ACT UP's existence were filled with great momentum to get attention for AIDS victims and help eradicate the needless deaths being caused by a virus whose spread could have been halted if the government had done more. The early years of ACT UP also highlight how the organization was utilizing the media, news forums, arts, theatrics, symbols and emotions all as active participants in its weekly meetings, or its protests against organizations ranging from the New York Times, to the stock exchange. These protests served more than just immediate functions but they

brought gays and lesbians together and through demonstrating together, the gay community began to form a "...queer, anti-assimilationist, and oppositional identity (which) addressed its fears of social rejection" (Gould, p. 18).

### **Acting Out- political theater, symbols and protests**

ACT UP's radical identity was a key factor in how ACT UP approached each demonstration and media campaign. The logos of Silence=Death and Activism=Life, were adopted by the organization and it was plastered through out New York City. The logos use the emotion of anger to amplify their messages and became visual symbols for the organization. The logos are very radicalism because they clearly connect keeping silent about the AIDS epidemic with the notion of death. Cultural analysts theorize that death is by far one of the greatest fears of human beings and such a connection especially for PWA was departure from the complacent views about their participation in the realm of AIDS politics. In furthering its stance as a radical organization and empowering gays and lesbians, ACT UP adopted the pink triangle<sup>13</sup> as its symbol. ACT UP's use of symbols would stem further than the pink triangle, because its campaigns involved a lot of visual art, which was suggestive, provocative, insightful, and impassioned. It can be articulated that through the use of symbols such as the triangle and other similar ideas, ACT UP was trying to instill a level of pride and cohesiveness within a community railing from a deadly disease. In its now famous posters and slogans ACT UP lamented the inefficiency of the government, political figures, and the lack of resources being devoted to the halting the

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<sup>13</sup> The inverted pink triangle was used by the Nazi's to identify homosexuals in concentration camps. However, ACT UP adopted this as its symbol and thus reclaimed a symbol of shame and inverted its meaning. By doing so it empowered the community while being radical. Similarly, the black triangle was used to identify lesbians, who would use it as a symbol for the Lesbian's Avengers (Schulman, 1990).

AIDS epidemic. The forcefulness with which ACT UP fought was rather new to the arena of AIDS activism because the organization unabashedly lampooned or created effigies of various political and religious leaders. Douglass Crimp in his piece, “AIDS: Cultural Analysis/ Cultural Activism” tackles how culture and social norms were used by ACT UP to further its agendas but also further cultivate the radicalism of the organization. Crimp details the various slogans and images utilized by ACT UP by analyzing the SILENCE=DEATH Project. The project detailed the various stages in the growth of the epidemic and the response it generated, overwhelmingly embodied the idea that “...only information and mobilization can [could] save lives” (Crimp, p.12). Crimp’s analysis further illustrates how ACT UP’s workings as collective unit gave them the leverage, which other gay organizations lacked. ACT UP had community support and relied on volunteers who were not afraid to face the consequences of their actions. However, this collectivist radicalism set precedents, which made AIDS an issue for society at large not just the isolated groups in society. Other images crafted by the organization used popular the Benetton Ad <sup>14</sup> or the ingenious AIDSGATE poster, both of which shed light on statistical/historical data regarding the AIDS epidemic.

Daniel Harris, a writer from that time period, states “[since its inception] ACT UP created a self-styled “do-it yourself manual” on how to make effective visual propaganda in the fight against AIDS...” (Harris, p. 851). He goes on to state that ACT UP was the first organization of its kind to “...apply the unwieldy apparatus of contemporary art and literary theories to grass-roots activism” (Harris, p. 852). His assertions are correct

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<sup>14</sup> A popular add during the 1980s, which depicted mild nudity. However, ACT UP inverted the figure and created a rivetingly erotic transposition of the models’ sexes.

because ACT UP employed the arts and other visual stimuli to communicate its ideas to the general public. In New York City, the organization was a constantly on display due to its massive poster campaigns. Besides the posters and slogans plastered all around New York City, the various protests ACT UP NY organized or participated in were not just gatherings they became media events which were part theatrical, part political and most of the time very edgy.

Maxine Wolfe, a prominent member of ACT UP NY explains that ACT UP was non-partisan at the beginning, and this fact made it radical since it did not care for the political parties or factions within the gay community, it sought to create concrete and changes in the administration and public handling of the AIDS crisis. ACT UP utilized its grass-roots base in the gay community to stage a string of protests. Five major protests during the period from 1987-1990 include protests at Wall Street, Shea Stadium, the New York Times, the St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the FDA. These provide examples of how ACT UP used the media, availed resources and available technologies to initiate the exchange of ideas regarding AIDS. The protests embodied the mantra of collectivism and ushered in a wave of actions. These actions ranged from boycotting pharmaceutical companies or protesting governmental figures or policies and which relied on the various committees within ACT UP, which helped create and further carry out the demonstration.

Stephen Holden, a prominent writer from the late 1980s describes how the committees within ACT UP were the key parts of successful protests. The various committees were composed of eager volunteers who like their GMHC counterparts devoted their time and efforts to help plan and orchestrate the events. ACT UP reinvigorated the notion of creating made for media events, which were staged just so that

they could receive coverage and this would not only bring more people to the organization but also raise its profile in the media through the use of zaps, sit-ins- where protestors would chain themselves to buildings or other physical objects during the protest. Before fully venturing into some of ACT UP's protests it is important to understand the composition of ACT UP, its internal dynamics and its legacy as a socio-cultural movement.

Each of the protests I examine tackled the issues of governmental regulation of the crisis, whether it was the price or availability of certain drugs, changing the definition of AIDS/HIV symptoms, increased funding for research and public health awareness campaigns, or a greater involvement in halting the crisis. Its first protest targeted Wall Street. The protest took place on March 24<sup>th</sup>, about three weeks after ACT UP was created. By 1987, drug companies were manufacturing AZT, a drug, which seemed to halt the progress of the HIV retrovirus. The protest completely paralyzed Wall Street and garnered a lot of media attention. The angry and confrontational protest was a clear example of ACT UP's radical nature. Unlike GMHC, which had vast amount of resources and a foothold in the community, ACT UP's actions signaled a turn towards getting immediate results at what ever cost. The protest popularized ACT UP while it protested the drug profiteering being carried out by Burroughs Wellcome, the drug company manufacturing AZT. In its protest ACT UP turned AIDS into a political crisis, because it demanded the government and federal health agencies were letting AIDS ravage the gay community without taking any actions to speed up the research and manufacturing of more drugs to treat HIV/AIDS. The first protest set precedent for later ACT UP demonstrations, where a relatively small group of people created a large scene.

ACT UP's brand of protest incorporated direct action tactics and civil disobedience. As the organization formed committees concerned with media attention, staging the protest, and research, the protests themselves would become highly creative. This protest involved the work of the research committee within ACT UP, which focused "...on research to find promising experimental drugs and treatment programs, and monitor progress in drug trials" (Lambert, 1989). This committee would emerge as one of the leading facets of ACT UP in later years. The second protest highlights another radical aspect of ACT UP, because it brought its message to the masses and this was rather different for the gay community because it usually was insulated from the rest of the world.

The protest at Shea Stadium in the summer of 1988 highlighted how ACT UP had perfected the notion of "surgically planned demonstrations" (Morgan, 1988). The organization effectively deployed "agitational and professional looking graphics with slogans like "Enjoy AZT instead of Enjoy coca-cola" (Heller, 1990). ACT UP bought over 400 seats and according to stadium policies, having over 40 seats could enable a group to flash its name on the screen. ACT UP flashed its slick slogans such as "Men wear condoms" and "AIDS kills Women." This protest at a nationally broadcast sports event reached the masses, its controversial message attracted wide spread attention and the issue of AIDS became something tangible. The protest also showed a growing level of sophistication in the organization's presentation which had developed because of its many other protests prior to Shea Stadium which included protesting AIDS-phobia in Washington at the Third International Conference on AIDS, a four-day round the clock protest at Memorial Sloan Kettering due to the lack of clinical trials of AZT, and the

inauguration of the failed Reagan Presidential Commission on AIDS<sup>15</sup>.

By the end of 1988, ACT UP New York's activities had set off nearly 60 similar protest groups all across the United States (Morgan, 1988). This greater visibility allowed ACT UP to partake in even more daring protests. The FDA protests really showed that this organization had the political system in a state of upheaval. Its earlier protest of Wall Street Stock Exchange had helped decrease the time limit for testing AIDS drugs. This protest at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) shed light on the bureaucracy and the inefficiency of the agency, which is responsible for testing and approving possible AIDS treatments. This demonstration was in some sense reifying Crimp's statement,

“...it was science after all, that conceptualized AIDS as a gay disease--- and wasted precious time scrutinizing our [the gay community's] sex lives...and giving mega doses of poppers to mice at the CDC---all the while taking little notice of others dying of AIDS or any drugs which might help PWAs” (Crimp, p. 6).

Like the CDC or the NIH, the FDA experienced major cuts in funding due to the Reagan presidency. Nonetheless, the protest proved to be successful, where the FDA began to investigate different routes of acquiring the necessary funds. This protest like the others utilized posters, symbols and artfully used the media for its own advantage. This year also saw other smaller protests in New York City where ACT UP protested the rent and living expenses of ACT UP. The group wanted the City to be more aggressive and better equipped for providing needed services for PWAs. ACT UP would revisit the FDA

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<sup>15</sup> Its formation in 1987, when over 20,000 Americans had lost their lives to the disease left many to wonder why it took so long for the Reagan government to take action. The commission despite its right wing political composition won the support of many AIDS-awareness organizations. The commission proposed some of the following policy changes, which sadly were ignored by the Reagan and the Bush administrations. The commission proposed anti-bias laws to protect HIV-positive individuals, on-demand treatment for drug addicts, and the speeding of AIDS related research (Lambert, 1989).

in later years but this first protest was an important statement. The strings of protests carried out aside from the ones mentioned in this paper did help keep AIDS in the news, and subsequently receive a lot of attention. As Nelkin states, "...by publicizing an issue, media reports can set the policy agenda and significantly influence political decisions" thus ACT UP's continuous use of the media kept focus on the disease (Nelkin, p. 303). By 1989, the organization had gained a reputation for the eccentric and its reputation for protest/demonstration various issues was furthering the "de-invisibilization" of AIDS (Morgan, 1989).

During 1989, the organization protested the New York Times by employing a Christmas card zap to protest inadequate AIDS coverage. This protests fully brought light on the lack of coverage provided by the Times. With slogans saying "Buy your Lies Here, The New York Times Reports Half the Truth about AIDS" or "The New York Times AIDS reporting is OUT OF ORDER" on vending machines the protest sparked great media interest. The protest had been crafted due to one of the Times editorial that basically implied that its readers had little to worry about, since the disease was very largely defined to "specific risk groups" and went on to state that "Once all susceptible members [of these groups] are infected the numbers of new victims would decline" (Crimp, pg. 9). Such callousness and disregard infuriated gay activists because 200,000-400,000 people were already estimated to be HIV-infected in New York City (Crimp, pg. 10). This protest also involved altercations with the police, where ACT UP used vigilantly employed civil disobedience. Following the embarrassment the New York Times issued a retraction and also many of the writers who had been zapped in addition to the protest began writing more in depth pieces.

The demonstration further solidified ACT UP's stance as a vigilant watch dog for the gay community. The organization targeted anyone who in their eyes was not giving the AIDS epidemic the much needed attention. In crafting these protests, ACT UP exercised collective action, which was wholly radical in its inception. Unlike the protests of the early 1990s, ACT UP seemed to be more unified during the early year protests. Among many other things, the organization was not politically involved. It solely tried to raise conscious awareness of the AIDS crisis. Its attack on Mayor Ed Koch and other city and business leaders highlights that fact that it was in cohorts with no other institution or individual. It generated funds through its own resources and created its own venues to promote its message without involving itself with the big corporations and governmental lobby groups. The string of protests against New York City Mayor highlighted New York's slow response to enacting public health policy programs for PWAs. Furthermore, ACT UP was protesting the housing controversy whereby PWAs were finding it impossible to rent apartments, or buy houses. Instead of constructing facilities to house these individuals instead of giving big businesses tax credits to wealthy developers. Slogans such as "What does Koch Plan to do about AIDS? Invest in Marble and Granite (with a picture of the Mayor of New York against a field of tombstones)" began appearing all over the city and blatantly attacked the Mayor and his administrations' response to the AIDS crisis. The Mayor defended his handling of the crisis citing that he could only do so much when the "Reagan administration offered little leadership or money to localities. [Furthermore] State regulators grossly miscalculating [ed] the extent of AIDS, eliminated thousands of hospital beds as excess" (Lambert, 1989). In addition to protesting the mayor in the "Target City Hall" protest, ACT UP zapped other city and state officials in New

York and staged a series of protests in Albany. These protests utilized slick campaigns, which in some instances alerted the media prior to the time when the protest took place. This type of constructed media events really brought forth ACT UP's message but also led many to deem its activities as ways to gain self-promotion and recognition instead of exercising true political activism.

Living up to the title of a radical fringe organization, the "Stop the Church" demonstration fully thrust ACT UP into a broader sphere. Near the end of 1989, ACT UP Boston alongside ACT UP New York and fourteen other groups staged a demonstration at the St. Patrick's Cathedral was in response to the Church's opposition to safer sex education, violent homophobia and attempts to block access to safe and legal abortions. The demonstrations were highly publicized since one of the protestors purposefully stepped on the communion wafer among other antics. The protest itself was not very violent but the actions of a few individuals tainted it in a bad light. A similar protest took place in Boston however; the protestors there were far more suggestive and garnered even more negative press. Alongside these protests ACT UP staged many other successful demonstrations against the Whitehouse, where in 1992 over 200 protestors were arrested in front of the White House for protesting the Bush administration's response to AIDS. The organization also organized a condom and sex education pamphlet campaign outside of NYC public schools through the actions of YELL. The organization felt that the schools were promoting "chastity as the solution for preventing AIDS" when such advice was neither helpful nor easily implemented (Lambert, 1989). They worked with many groups such as Women's rights groups, Hemophiliacs, Minority groups, and formed many other groups within their organization such as the Women's Caucus, the Latino/Black caucus in

addition to the Treatment and Data committee. The various activities of ACT UP clearly show an organization, which tried to highlight AIDS in all its manifestations despite the consequences.

The early years of ACT UP were very much a period of mobilization and collective action, although it would stage successful protests in the early 1990s, such as its demonstrations “Storm the NIH” among campaigns against the Presidential Commission on AIDS, the FDA, the CDC, and others it lost a major part of its appeal by forming political alliances and getting political. ACT UP’s brand of political activism was dependent on the individual; it was non-partisan however as ACT UP gained popularity it began to lose its initial focus. I only focused on these five protests to highlight how ACT UP’s efforts to raise awareness and demand change impacted a myriad of social, political and religious institutions. Each of these protests involved an extensive planning and organization. ACT UP’s various committees used the socio-political environment of the late 1980s to craft a cohesive response against federal disregard for the AIDS crisis. For instance, 1987 marked the death of over 20,000 Americans the early 1990s saw this figure increase exponentially. Nonetheless, AZT was still the major drug being distributed for AIDS treatment.

ACT UP’s protests of the FDA and CDC helped speed up the process of testing and producing the drug. The organization also helped fight for reduced cost for AZT and other drugs, which treated various diseases associated with the HIV/AIDS disease. The responses from social critics, religious leaders such as Father O’Connor who staunchly opposed the Catholic Church’s possible endorsement of safe sex practices, also popularized the organization. ACT UP became a media conglomerate, because its protests

were theatrical and very sophisticated in content and presentation, but furthermore the protests often resulted in arrests and further court injunctions, which would keep the media attention on ACT UP. The famous “Stop the Church” protest and other major protests against President Reagan, and later on President Bush did not just politicize the disease they were important in generating a response. Another facet of ACT UP involved its use of volunteers as tools for political mobilization. Unlike the service oriented GMHC, ACT UP attracted people from a wide spectrum of fields and their participation greatly added a level of sophistication to the organization. By the beginning of the 1990s ACT UP had evolved itself into a vibrant political economy, an organization, which had developed strong political, economical and social footholds in society. It is important now to analyze the various arguments presented for the decline of ACT UP over the course of the early 1990s because they offer concrete parallels to the creation and development of ACT UP.

### **ACT UP- the era of decline**

The 1990s saw a string of ACT UP protests, the launch of DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists), the expansion of the YELL (Youth Education Life Line), and greater political involvement with the groups endorsement of a Manhattan Project for AIDS research in New York and Universal Health care. Despite the seemingly positive outlook given by these developments, ACT UP was seeing a decline. Its meetings which in the early 1980s saw over 500 people were session now saw a handful of volunteers. The changing political landscape with the onset of the Gulf War created a level of indifference for the crisis and despite political mobilization, ACT UP, which was once glorified by the media, now faced criticism of being a self-absorbed organization. People who were once sympathetic to its cause felt the organization was too involved with partisan politics to

make any real impact. Aside from that, even its political funerals, where the ashes of AIDS victims were commemorated in various forms failed to strike a chord with the people. As Crimp states in his piece “Mourning and Militancy”, the organization in its attempt to politically charge its members failed to address the emotional aspects of the disease. Mourning was not just a means to use anger in protests, it was something much more guarded and something that ACT UP never fully grasped. The once vibrant political community now had become a passing fad.

At its height of popularity, ACT UP was a major hub for gays and lesbians to interact and socialize. However, with the emergence of other organizations such as Queer Nation<sup>16</sup>, and the separation of TAG from ACT UP was on the way to decline. Its utilization of anger as the vehicle for change slowly became tiring, as Kramer stated, “how long can someone remain frustrated and angry” (Lambert, 1992). The organization also suffered greatly due to the deaths of many of its members, the AIDS plague ravaged the organization. Further, the organization became internally divided between people who were HIV positive and HIV negative. Both groups wanted ACT UP to champion different causes, where the HIV positive group focused on more radical demonstrations for speedier trials of AZT and development of new drugs, the HIV negative group alongside the women’s caucus wanted sustained trails to gauge the impact of drug trials on the women’s

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<sup>16</sup> Queer Nation was founded in March 1990 in New York City by AIDS activists from ACT UP. The founders were outraged at the escalation of anti-gay and lesbian violence on the streets and prejudice in the arts and media. Queer Nation’s popularized the slogan “*We’re here. We’re queer. Get used to it.*” Aside from its militant protest style, as opposed to the more reformist gay rights organizations, Queer Nation was most effective and powerful in the early 1990s in the USA, and used direct action to fight for gay rights. They worked with ACT-UP as well as WHAM!, however, the organization could not sustain itself. Even though never officially disbanded, most sources agree that Queer Nation no longer exists. The organization reclaimed the word “queer,” which previously was used in a negative way to describe homosexuals. The adoption of this word faced a lot of criticism from within the gay community (De Stefano, 1993).

health and also its impact during pregnancy. The organization suffered greatly due to internal and external divisions and for some historians and analysts, it began to lose its radical appeal. Peter F. Cohen, a prominent social researcher proposes some interesting ideas, which make ACT UP seem less radical and more conformist through out its history. He proposes the implications of “class style” and the notion of “bourgeoisie militancy” in his piece, “All They Needed”: AIDS, Consumption, and the Politics of Class” and his book Love and Anger- Essays on AIDS, Activism, and Politics.

In his paper, he states, “...ACT UP’s initial focus was on drugs, and that homophobic politicians, profit-obsessed pharmaceutical companies and an inadequate federal bureaucracy were preventing from reaching the people” (Cohen, p. 90). His assessment is very accurate, because the initial focus of ACT UP was on finding the cure and protesting the lethargy on part of the government and scientific community. He further asserts that as ACT UP grew and so did the various committees which formed the organization. One such committee, the Treatment and Data (T & D) committee, was nationally recognized as a source for information on drug research, pharmaceutical companies, and international efforts against AIDS. Aside from internal growth, the organization like its predecessor the GLF wanted to become inclusive thus it increased its efforts to expand into the realms of public advocacy for the homeless, youth, women’s rights to clinical treatments, insurance and hospital fraud. Nonetheless, its core base remained “...a group of affluent white men with little involvement with grassroots activism” (Cohen, pg. 90). Though ACT UP was composed of many people, women and minorities, the organization was greatly divided by class politics. For Cohen this division is a key factor in developing a new perception of ACT UP. As he puts it, “...individuals

came to ACT UP with class understandings and specific goals from their participation” (Cohen, pg. 90). Since a majority of ACT UP was made up of white, gay, middle-class men it was wholly biased in its actions because the main contingency within the organization had closer ties to the socio-political mainstream.

The members of ACT UP- the lawyers, architects, doctors, teachers and other educated elite- desired to retain their social and political wellbeing, thus their actions were not truly radical. He contends that ACT UP set “moderate goals which promoted a reformist agenda in its protests” going on further to state that the majority rules ideas championed by ACT UP made the agenda biased towards the largest group in present (the middle-class). He further critiques the notion of entitlement within the organization by which the members, in particular, the white gay men felt that the government owed them a response due to their class and stature in society. Such critiques though valid fail to realize that ACT UP, despite its flaws was very radical in the beginning.

Despite the limited experience of the members or the class composition, its early years mainly from 1987-1990 were some of the most vibrant years of its history. Although as the organization grew and expanded to include more ideas and different goals, it did begin to veer of its initial path and succumbed to the fate that Cohen details in his book. But prior to the 1990s, ACT UP was a focal point for the community, despite its many flaws as Cohen asserts in his piece, the organization unified the gay community, its anger and frustration against the complacent government and initiated concrete and immediate results. The reduction of cost for AZT, the speedier trials for testing and manufacturing the drugs, these changes required radical action. The media attention further solidifies the notion that ACT UP was very much radical, with its ingenious use of symbols, slogans,

and images plastered all across New York City as a way to raise the public's interest in the crisis. Cohen makes it seem that ACT UP was not radical from the beginning, however, that is very misconstrued. The rally at which Kramer spoke was not just a rally for white gay men from the middle class; it was rally for all gays and lesbians, of all races and ethnic backgrounds. Some of them were radical while others might have been less inclined to risk their social status but together they unified and fought the political, religious and social elite to aid the victims of AIDS. The change from radical fringe to a conformist organization occurred more rapidly in the early 1990s than at the time of formation. This change also was more visible in later years and the idea of working with the government became more accepted as the 1990s progressed.

Although the internal dynamics of ACT UP greatly changed at the onset of the 1990s, its initial successes cannot be marginalized in any fashion. I agree with Cohen's analysis which deals with the change within ACT UP, an internal shift which greatly reduced its radical characteristics and made it similar to GMHC where as other groups such as Queer Nation began to take the angry confrontational stance and attracted those who felt ACT UP had gotten too involved with the politics of Washington and abandoned political activism for political conformism. Cohen articulates that the ambivalence within ACT UP fully materialized once its veneer of collectivity and unity began to crack. The organization faced the daunting challenges of satisfying all its members and initiating relevant demonstrations. For instance, ACT UP planned a community awareness event spearheaded by the ACT UP Latino Caucus. The problem was that this event was planned in ACT UP's office in lower Manhattan where there was no significant way to access the needs of the Latino community. This example illustrates Cohen's point that ACT UP's

class divisions began to infiltrate its actions because the organization was not able to remain unified.

Cohen's analysis presents evidence which contrary to his broader argument states, "...after an initial period of street activism...ACT UP NY experienced a shift in tactics: activist pressure in the form of demonstrations made opportunities to sit down with policy makers available and activists took eager advantage of them" (Cohen, pg. 98). Although he brings about the argument of "class style" his reference to the street activism shows that ACT UP possessed some sort of grassroots mobilization and some semblance of unity. But he explicitly attacks the aforementioned point in various other parts of his paper, making it clear that ACT UP was indeed more radical in its early years when compared to its later activities as organization to take a "place at the table."

Another factor for decline was the changing political climate of the early 1990s. The onset of the Gulf War lessened the appeal of the anger and oppositional activism of the 1980s. Many critics felt that AIDS was getting enough attention and adequate funding. Timothy F. Murphy in his article "No Times for an AIDS Backlash" cites a Chicago Tribune writer who states "...there is no governmental indifference regarding AIDS any longer...since vast sums are being spent on AIDS research. Far more per victim than on cancer, heart disease and other diseases that kill far more people...some of the posters promoting AIDS awareness have less to do with AIDS and more with promoting homosexuality" (Murphy, pg. 7). Homophobia once again began to resurface and the community started to face a backlash, which lessened the impact of a radical organization such as ACT UP.

Another interesting notion, which Cohen highlights in his book, also highlights a

major reason for ACT UP's demise. The idea of "bourgeoisie militancy", which he uses to describe the activities of ACT UP since it was composed of white, gay, middle-class and affluent individuals. He argues that ACT UP, although inclusive, was rather disillusioned in its approach to resolving issues plaguing gays. The great diversity within the gay community hindered any sustained collective response as most politically inclined organized end up falling of track because they make social, political statements, which are contrary to existing norms. This division of class struck at different levels such as the notion of being on the inside or the outside, which ties into the ideas of external and internal goals. Whereas initially ACT UP was an entity on the outskirts of the political realm, as it grew more prominent, it began to come closer to the mainstream. Aside from all these issues, the disenfranchisement of the women and minority members of ACT UP whose ideas were not fully analyzed or given proper time greatly weakened the organization. ACT UP did host events for the various communities but never fully conducted research on the causes and the role of the AIDS epidemic in each community. Thus, as Cohen states, "...the infighting over tactical issues, the vast majorities support of a combined "inside-outside" approach over the exclusive use of one or the other" (Cohen, p. 60-61).

The formation of TAG, or the Treatment Action Group in 1990, also greatly demoralized the ACT UP members. This organization was formed by the Treatment and Data committee and was more accommodative of the government. Once the adequate pressure had been applied to the government and businesses, TAG members used very sophisticated and expensive techniques to find a way into the organization and in some sense take permanent seats on various lobby and governmental agencies. Such actions by

the T&D committee signaled the end of street activism and gave credence to the notion of the middle class militants who would fight to a certain extent and then begin working on the inside. This dichotomy destabilized the group where the women and other members of ACT UP felt skeptical of this new “inside” approach. After all ACT UP had used its politicized rhetoric and angry stance to attract people but now this assimilation was a major blow to the survival of the organization. Unlike its early years, ACT UP became associated with certain companies, or brands and its protests lost relevance within the gay community. Externally, the political and social climate had shifted dramatically and AIDS had continued to destroy the lives of prominent activists. The early 1990s also saw the death of many individuals who had been part of the Stonewall generation. The organization had lost its focus and its involvement with the Clinton campaign further pushed it into the realm of decrepitude. ACT UP supported the 1992 Presidential Hopeful after he promised them a “Manhattan project” dealing with AIDS research. This received a great deal of fan fare within the community, however, when the time came to actually plan and execute this project, the Clinton administration failed to live up to its promise (Cohen, p. 64). ACT UP also came under criticism by other gay and community organizations for its exorbitant spending. Unlike other organizations which struggled to sustain themselves, ACT UP lavishly spent money on office supplies, such as faxing and copying machines, its members treated themselves in first class hotels when visiting conferences or other ventures outside of NY (Cohen, p. 62). The organization also failed to keep good financial records and ran on a deficit for the majority of the early 1990s. Despite the fact that ACT UP organized many fund raisers and other charity events. Cohen states that ACT UP raised over \$300,000 from a celebrity art auction in 1989 and another \$500,000 in 1990

while amassing tens of thousands of dollars from direct mail campaigns (Cohen, p. 102). ACT UP's ability to raise such type of money was contingent on its connections within the business and arts community. ACT UP further spent over \$80,000 on the sixth International Conference on AIDS in 1990. With such a high level of spending, the organization became highly accustomed to getting funds and thus lost greatly when funds began to run low by 1993. By that point, its appeal had dwindled, and its resources were depleted. Due to its reliance on money to function in the same arena as big business and governmental lobby groups, it failed miserably once the money began to run low. The financial strings attached to ACT UP in its later years embody "bourgeoisie militancy", where "the resources of the individuals and the group allowed it to engage regularly in militant protests which would not be possible if that organization was composed of other social classes" (Cohen, p. 105).

**Conclusion:**

Despite its slow demise in the early 1990s, ACT UP truly made an impact on the gay community. In narrating this story of ACT UP's internal evolution where by it went from being a radical fringe of society to becoming more conformist I have tried to highlight the various stances of AIDS in popular society. Although cultural analyst such as Cohen have asserted that the early activities of ACT UP were not necessarily radical, his argument in this particular regard is not valid because it fails to elucidate how the early years of ACT UP were more radical than its later years. Through analysis of literary sources which included books and articles by prominent writers, activists, and analysts from the 1980s and 1990s, it can be ascertained that ACT UP experienced a period of

rapid growth during which it changed the social, political, and cultural percepts of AIDS in American society and left an indelible mark on the pages of history.

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