

## **LGBT: A Dissection**

**By David Thorstad**

“LGBT” is everywhere these days. But is it here to stay, or is it a passing fad? Where did it come from? Why was it promoted? By whom? And to what end? How did it acquire its seemingly endless variants?

The acronym, in its many permutations, designates a movement very different from the gay liberation movement it evolved from. Some might see it as progress, expansion, and greater inclusivity, others as a tombstone for what was once a radical sexual liberation movement.

It did not result from any democratic discussion or consensus among gay and lesbian activists. Not since the early 1980s has the gay movement held national conferences open to all groups and factions where issues could be debated and decided democratically. The acronym appeared as if out of the ether without input from the very people it is supposed to represent. One can only speculate as to the reasons for this. This article will attempt to do that.

### **Looking Back**

I joined New York’s iconic Gay Activists Alliance in 1974. GAA was formed as a single-issue alternative to the Gay Liberation Front a year after the 1969 Stonewall Riots. GLF soon left the stage, but GAA went on to incubate a number of other gay and lesbian groups, among them Lesbian Feminist Liberation, Gay Teachers Association, an SM group, gay academics, and gay religious groups. At its height it included most gay subcategories, including transvestites, drag, leftists, Democrats, academics. It followed Roberts Rules of Order, so meetings were long and cantankerous. Over time, groupings split away to form their own groups. In the mid-1970s, GAA sponsored monthly forums for a year on numerous topics, some of them pathbreaking, such as “Bisexuality and Gay Liberation: How Are They Related?,” “Religion and Gay Liberation: Are They Compatible?,” and, in 1976, the first-ever forum by any gay group anywhere on man/boy love (“Of Men and Boys: Pederasty and the Age of Consent”).

I helped organize the bisexuality forum, whose panelists included Kate Millett. I went to a meeting of National Bisexual Liberation on Manhattan’s Upper

West Side to invite them to send a spokesperson to the forum. They did. But the vibes I got from some men at their meeting bordered on hostile. They appeared to resent my blatant homosexual presence and to be calling themselves bisexual as a way of avoiding being branded with the “H” word. That was common in the 1970s. Almost every gay man I knew, and most of the lesbians, were technically bisexual because we had experienced sex with the opposite sex and some of us continued to do so—even occasionally with each other. But most of us identified as gay or lesbian. Saying you were bisexual looked like you were trying to give the impression that you weren’t “really homosexual.” Unlike gay-identifieds, you were not a pervert. Nevertheless, GAA embraced bisexuality by holding the first-ever forum by a gay group on the topic. It was part of our experience as human beings. The title of the forum didn’t ask if homosexuality and bisexuality were related, but *how* they were related. We saw ourselves as falling somewhere on the Kinsey scale of 1–6, but it didn’t matter precisely where.

We wore “Gay Is Good” and “Better Blatant Than Latent” buttons. But some activists resisted labels. A photo in the early newspaper *Come Out!*, for example, shows GLF activist Jim Fouratt holding a sign that said “I Am a Humansexual.”

In the immediate post-Stonewall period, the movement for homosexual rights was called gay liberation. No acronym. Four years after Stonewall, in 1973, that was still the case when the National Gay Task Force was formed by some former leaders of GAA who wanted an elitist group not hindered by democratic decision making. (It subsequently changed its acronym from NGTF to NGLTF and now calls itself the National LGBTQ Task Force.)

By the mid-1970s, as the women’s liberation movement grew, with lesbians playing a key role in it, lesbians were chafing at their alleged “invisibility” in organizations run mostly by men. Their assertiveness led to gay liberation becoming gay and lesbian liberation, or lesbian and gay liberation. In those days, feminists and lesbian feminists argued that some oppressions were more oppressive than others, and the longer the list of oppressions was, the greater the badge of distinction. Thus, an example of “the most oppressed” might be a black lesbian single mother on welfare. This kind of mechanical weighting of oppression was simplistic and ahistorical.

Feminism in the 1970s saw a strange phenomenon called “political lesbianism”—women who identified as lesbian even though they had never had sex with another woman. Men were the enemy, and sleeping with them was retro, oppressive, something to escape. Identifying as a lesbian was more radical, even though the “political lesbian” might never have actually engaged in lesbian sex. This outlook was inspired by Ti-Grace Atkinson’s phrase “Feminism is the theory; lesbianism is the practice.” Some who espoused this view apparently considered sex dirty, but saw cachet in identifying with lesbians as supposedly more radical, even chic, sisters. I have never encountered anything similar among males. Most straight men would have considered being labeled a “homo” as a fate worse than death. But this marriage between identity and antisexuality lives on in “LGBT,” where sex and sexual liberation are replaced by a focus on anodyne, de-sexed identity and gender.

As late as the late 1980s, “lesbian” and “gay” were used interchangeably. The 1987 New York Pride Guide, for example, used “gay and lesbian,” not “lesbian and gay.” But over time, “lesbian” came to occupy first place. By the late 1970s, lesbians had conquered the first place in New York’s pride march—a tip of the hat to the belief that lesbian oppression is more harsh and more worthy of acknowledgment than that of gay men, even though that is not borne out by the history of acute gay male oppression in the West by the Judeo-Christian tradition and Anglo-Saxon legal codes. It would be more equitable to alternate between lesbians leading the march one year, gay men the next.

Sometime in the 1980s, the B was added, and by the 1990s, LGBT had become the generally used label.

This evolution was highlighted in the booklet published in 2006 by the Duluth–Superior Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Allied, Queer, and Intersex pride committee relating how its name grew over the years. In 1991, the committee became the Twin Ports Gay and Lesbian Pride Committee. In 1992, it added “Bisexual” to its name. In 1995, “Transgender” was added. The next year, it changed its name to Duluth–Superior GLBT Pride. In 2001, “Allied” was added, followed by “Queer” in 2002. Finally, the addition of “Intersex” produced the unwieldy GLBTAQI.<sup>1</sup>

## Community or Fantasy?

The LGBTQ etc. acronym purports to reflect an actually existing community—as was explicitly stated, for example, in the 2008 Duluth–Superior GLBTAQI Pride Guide: “We must always remember the struggle the GLBTAQI community has faced and the hard work that has already been done.” But no such community exists.<sup>2</sup> I would argue that just as there is no such thing as an “LGBT person,” there is no shared community among the hodgepodge identities lumped together in the acronym. That is all the more obvious in view of the absurd lengths to which the acronym has expanded, such as LGBTQQIAA2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, allied, asexual, two-spirit).<sup>3</sup> Queers for Economic Justice came up with its own version: LGBTGNC (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender nonconforming). A leaflet from a caucus of New York’s Occupy Wall Street took this to a bizarre extreme—“Queer/LGBTIQA2Z”—by tacking on “2Z.” The Z presumably stands for any identity not already included, and the “2Z” apparently echoes the phrase “A to Z.”<sup>4</sup> This unpronounceable mouthful is a *reductio ad absurdum*.

Here’s another, from an interview with Dan Savage, the founder of “It Gets Better”:

*Suzanne Stroh:* I saw one abbreviation that contained something like twelve letters. I think it was LGBTQQIP2SAA. Some letters I can’t even guess.

*Dan Savage:* Lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning, intersex, pansexual, two-spirit, asexual—and I don’t know what the other A is. What you left out was LF, which I’ve seen, which stands for Leather Fetish, and on and on and on. I think we should sing the alphabet song twice to get those Qs in there twice, and be done with it.<sup>5</sup>

The ever-expanding acronym—a kind of perverse inversion of “*e pluribus unum*”—is apparently intended to convey the notion of diversity and inclusivity. The implied conceit is that it encompasses all sexual and gender identities. In that it fails, despite its unwieldiness. Two of the most obvious behaviors excluded inhabit the margins of the former gay movement: pederasty and sadomasochism. Their omission is intentional: including them would signal acceptance of behaviors that lie outside the acceptability parameters of a movement that seeks acceptance

and assimilation into the dominant society rather than challenging its prejudices. Both SMers and pederasts played significant roles in gay liberation from the start. Pederast anarchists in Germany, for example, launched the world's first gay periodical in 1896, *Der Eigene*, a year before Magnus Hirschfeld launched his Scientific-Humanitarian Committee.<sup>6</sup> Pederasty has been a feature of male homosexuality throughout most of Western (and not only Western) history and represents its high points in art during ancient Greece and the Renaissance. But that hasn't stopped the pc LGBT "movement" from anathematizing it.

Another group left out is heterosexuals. Yet post-Stonewall gay activists took as their goal the liberation of sexuality, including heterosexuality, which, despite the privileges it enjoys in heterodominant society, could benefit from liberation from its patriarchal and reproductive strictures.

The notion that the multiple identities included in the acronym represent a community is absurd. Even gay men and lesbians—whether taken separately or together—do not constitute a community. The only thing they share is their attraction to people of the same sex. In one sense, gay men have more in common with straight women—both are attracted to the male of the species. The priority for most lesbians is their femaleness, whereas for most gay men it's their attraction to other males. The terms "gay community" and "lesbian community" are fictional constructs. Each consists of many different, sometimes conflicting, subsets rather than a supposed supra-class unity.

The disconnect is even more striking when it comes to the T. The trans phenomenon is antithetical to the outlook of gay liberation and feminism (aside from a shared opposition to discrimination). Rather than challenging sex-role stereotyping and struggling to liberate repressed sexuality, trans accentuates hetero stereotyping by imitating episodic features of the opposite sex, using hormones to develop physical features of the desired gender or resorting to surgery to remove breasts or penises. Such drastic measures are horrifying to most same-sexers and echo nineteenth-century views that homosexuals were a third sex trapped inside the wrong body.<sup>7</sup> An extreme example of a transperson's substitution of idealism for material reality is that of Stefonknee Wolschtt, a man who "transitioned" to a female gender after twenty-three years of marriage and fatherhood and who does not "want to be an adult right now": "I can't deny I was married. I can't deny I

have children. But I've moved forward now and I've gone back to being a child." Wolschtt now claims to be a six-year-old girl.<sup>8</sup> It seems far-fetched to see any connection between this and gay liberation.

"LGBT" rejects fluidity and ambiguity in favor of fixed and frozen identities. This flies in the face of everything known about human (and primate) sexual behavior, as well as the lived experience of most gay men and lesbians. Cross-cultural studies show that same-sex behavior exists in all societies studied, and can range from occasional to exclusive—as Alfred Kinsey's studies also showed—and becomes more prevalent the higher up the phylogentic scale one goes.<sup>9</sup>

The addition of "queer" to the list is apparently meant to get around that obstacle. But the word itself is problematic and carries unpleasant baggage. It allegedly describes anyone who falls outside the boundaries of heteronormativity. Just about anyone can call himself or herself queer. But "queer" has historically applied mostly to gay males, and has long been considered a deadly insult, one bearing a threat of violent assault. The *Village Voice* once noted that it was the only word that U.S. commanders during the Vietnam War could rely on to prod reluctant GIs to fight. "Queer" struck terror in any guy who was called one. That's why it was long anathema to gay liberationists. Its negative power was similar to that of the N-word. Teenage (male) gay-bashers who call their victims "queer" are lashing out against their own repressed sexual desires. For gay liberation, same-sex love is as natural as other-sex love; its goal is to liberate the repressed homoerotic potential of everyone, including so-called straights.

Those homosexuals who embrace the epithet argue that they are "reclaiming" it and thereby stripping it of its terrorist power. That argument is unconvincing. It implies that "queer" was once embraced by the oppressed but that it was hijacked by hostile others. That's illogical and contrary to historical fact. In February 2016, Huffington Post's Gay Voices changed its name to Queer Voices. Its editor, Noah Michelson explained the decision as follows:

We, like [many others before us](#), have chosen to reclaim "queer" and to rename the section HuffPost Queer Voices because we believe that word is the most inclusive and empowering one available to us to speak to and about the community -- and because we are inspired by all of the profound

possibilities it holds for self-discovery, self-realization and self-affirmation. We also revere its emphasis on intersectionality, which aids in creating, building and sustaining community while striving to bring about the liberation of all marginalized people, queer or not.

"Queer" functions as an umbrella term that includes not only the lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people of "LGBT," but also those whose identities fall in between, outside of or stretch beyond those categories, including genderqueer people, intersex people, asexual people, pansexual people, polyamorous people and those questioning their sexuality or gender, to name just a few. These groups have been and will continue to be featured on The Huffington Post, however now the section dedicated to these identities will be inclusive not only in scope but also in name.<sup>10</sup>

The first gay group to emblazon "queer" on its banner was Queer Nation in 1990. At New York's gay pride rally in Union Square on June 23, 1990, it distributed a large brochure titled "Queers Read This!" ("published anonymously by queers") in which it asked, "Why Queer?":

Well, yes, "gay" is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we've chosen to call ourselves queer. Using "queer" is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It's a way of telling ourselves we don't have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike GAY, doesn't mean MALE . . . Yeah, QUEER can be a rough word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him.

This strikes me as delusional and little more than wishful thinking. The group was famous for its slogan "We're here, we're queer; get used to it!" But the word seems to have had its broadest currency among academics, including New York University's kultkrit queen Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, whose *Epistemology of the Closet*, which also appeared in 1990, helped spawn "queer studies" and "queer theory." Queer Nation proposed the existence of a "queer nationality"—a bizarre notion, to say the least, since same-sex behavior has nothing to do with nationhood

or nationality. Within five years, the group had virtually disappeared. But “queer” persisted.

As historian and lexicographer Wayne Dynes aptly observes,

The gay and lesbian embrace of the Q word is striking in view of the earlier history of aversion, at least in the United States. In fact the claim that the word has been “detoxified” is contested, especially by older people. They remember a time when its utterance all too often served as a token of hatred, the opening gambit in an ugly game that, played out to its end, meant fag bashing. . . . In any event, to many veterans it seems ageist for the young to set aside the feelings of older gay men and lesbians as of no account. Ageism is a cardinal sin among the politically correct, though one that is scarcely combatted with the same zeal as racism, sexism, and looksism.<sup>11</sup>

Writer John Rechy pointedly dismisses “queer”:

Now comes the odious word “queer”, eagerly seized by dippy academics and converted into yet another undecipherable “theory”. The rationale? Defuse the word “queer” of its ugly meaning, arrogate it and convert it. Oh? How about proposing “dyke theory”, “kike theory”, “nigger theory”, “spik theory”, “dago theory”, “fag theory”, “cunt theory”? Would that defuse those hateful names, strip them of their dangerous power? How, then does “queer”, the language of gay-bashers, purge the devastating meaning?<sup>12</sup>

One can imagine why ivory-tower academics might cling to “queer,” because conceivably it’s a tool for maintaining their particular fief in academia or for getting grants and book contracts. It’s harder to understand the lemming-like embrace of “queer” by any self-respecting gay man, or by people who identify as “LGBT.”

If the disparate groups and identities in the alphabet soup constitute a fictional “LGBTQ community,” is it a useful fiction? And if so, for whom?

## **The Politics of LGBT**

Gay liberation as a radical sexual freedom movement went out pretty much in tandem with the rise of the “LGBT” “movement.” Of course, gay lib wasn’t the



only movement of the countercultural 1960s to fade into a pale version of its original self. That was true of all sixties movements. Some, like the Black Panthers and Malcolm X, were murdered into extinction by the authorities. Others, like the women's movement and the gay/lesbian movement, were co-opted, their more radical elements vanishing or dying off. AIDS killed off many gay male sex radicals. Gay pride marches became corporatized folkloric displays and capitalist advertising venues. Feminism veered off into antimale campaigns demonizing porn, prostitution, public sex, pederasty—the four evil “P’s.”<sup>13</sup> The Left sank into near irrelevancy following its heyday during the anti-Vietnam War movement and the sixties rebellion. Labor union membership dwindled to 11.3 percent in 2013, compared to 20.1 percent in 1983, and never escaped its stifling ties to the Democrat Party. Of all the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, only an environmental movement continued to show signs of life.

The ascendancy of LGBT represented several things:

- All talk of sex was eliminated. A struggle for sexual freedom was replaced by a quest for mere “equality.” “We are family” became the mantra. “We’re just like you.”
- The LGBT agenda pursued assimilation, patriotism, and conventionality: aping of the failing hetero institution of marriage; enthusiastic participation in the imperialist military; passage of hate-crimes laws that strengthened the police state and punished thoughts and intent.
- A struggle for social justice and against capitalist injustice was replaced by a parochial focus on identity.
- It had the effect of erasing gay males in favor of a diluted hodgepodge of identities.
- It became a new interest group and electoral constituency oriented mostly toward the Democrat Party and assimilation into the capitalist system. Not being beholden to any democratic base, it was easily, and willingly, co-opted by the ruling class.

- It became part of the imperialist project, used by the State Department under Democrat regimes to bludgeon third-world countries into acquiescing to the Western agenda, even where the notion of “LGBT” was alien to their cultures.<sup>14</sup> The government spent millions to advance this “gay imperialism” under the guise of supporting “human rights.”

The morphing of gay liberation into LGBTQetc. reflects at once a growing social acceptance of nonhetero lifestyles and a retreat from a struggle to liberate the repressed sexuality of everyone in favor of accommodation with the heterodominant, capitalist system. It downplays issues of social justice in favor of seeking rights for identities acceptable to the dominant society. It elevates political expediency and opportunism over scientific and historical accuracy. It represents the triumph of conventionality, conformism, and conservatism over ambiguity, creativity, and radical individuality. It is a form of Newspeak in the service of ideological rigidity and the status quo.

An alternative approach might involve a coalition around a specific shared goal of everyone who agrees with it, including straights. But it’s probably too late for that. If LGBTQ is here to stay, we’re not any better off for it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Duluth–Superior GLBTAQI Pride, August 31–September 3, 2006, 4–5.

<sup>2</sup> A survey by a graduate student at the University of Minnesota assumes participants belong to an “LGBTQ community,” even though there is no such community. See [https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_exEzZwATq4oHmB?utm\\_source=News+and+Action+Alerts&utm\\_campaign=f6693a0248-Newsletter\\_Jan\\_08\\_2016&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_637e07f90e-f6693a0248-300655557](https://umn.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_exEzZwATq4oHmB?utm_source=News+and+Action+Alerts&utm_campaign=f6693a0248-Newsletter_Jan_08_2016&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_637e07f90e-f6693a0248-300655557).

<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the broad-brush application of “two-spirit” and how it is alien to Ojibwe culture, see my article “On ‘Sweet,’ ‘Yellow Head,’ and ‘Two-Spirit,’” <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2015/thorstad240315.html>.

<sup>4</sup> “Queer/LGBTIQAZZ issues are economic issues,” <https://queerows.wordpress.com/resources/queerlgbtqaz2z-issues-are-economic-issues-2/>.

<sup>5</sup> “The Case for Optimism,” *Gay & Lesbian Review* 23:1 (January–February 2016): 16.

<sup>6</sup> See John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864–1935)*, rev. ed. (Ojai, Calif.: Times Change Press, 1995); James D. Steakley, *The Homosexual Emancipation Movement in Germany* (New York: Arno Press, 1975); and my “Man/Boy Love Then and Now: A Personal-Political Appraisal,” [http://www.williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=David\\_Thorstad#Pederasty\\_and\\_Homosexuality](http://www.williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=David_Thorstad#Pederasty_and_Homosexuality).

<sup>7</sup> See Lauritsen and Thorstad, *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864–1935)*, 51–56. For a passionate argument against LGBTQ, see John Lauritsen, “Down with LGBTQ!,” <http://paganpressbooks.com/jpl/LGBTQ.HTM>.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/canada/transgender-father-stefonknee-wolchtt-leaves-family-in-toronto-to-start-new-life-as-six-year-old-girl/ar-BBnwBdj>.

<sup>9</sup> Two important such studies, besides Kinsey's, are Clellan S. Ford and Frank A. Beach, *Patterns of Sexual Behavior* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1951), and Wainwright Churchill, *Homosexual Behavior among Males: A Cross-Cultural and Cross-Species Investigation* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/huffpost-gay-voices-changed-name-huffpost-queer-voices\\_us\\_56a78f78e4b0172c659422f9](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/huffpost-gay-voices-changed-name-huffpost-queer-voices_us_56a78f78e4b0172c659422f9).

<sup>11</sup> Wayne R. Dynes, "Queer Studies: In Search of a Discipline," <http://www.paganpressbooks.com/jpl/QUEER.HTM>.

<sup>12</sup> John Rechy, "Political Incorrectness: Female Actors and Trojans," <http://www.paganpressbooks.com/jpl/Q-JR.HTM>.

<sup>13</sup> This was typified by the adoption by the National Organization for Women in October 1980 of a resolution submitted by its Lesbian Rights Committee condemning these supposedly antifemale practices, as well as SM. The attached "concept paper" had a novel definition of pederasty ("the involvement of children by adults in sexual activity") and said, absurdly: "it is well known that over 90% of all pederasts are heterosexual males who seek out young girls as their victims"! See my "Man/Boy Love and Feminism,"

[http://www.williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=David\\_Thorstad#Pederasty\\_and\\_Homosexuality](http://www.williamapercy.com/wiki/index.php?title=David_Thorstad#Pederasty_and_Homosexuality).

<sup>14</sup> Typically, a report on the hypocritical treatment of pederasty among jihadists of the Islamic State, with some youths executed for it while their adult partners were spared because they are commanders, lumped pederasty into the inappropriate category of "LGBT people." See "The Secret Hypocritical Gay World of ISIS," <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/01/06/the-secret-hypocritical-gay-world-of-isis.html>.