A Review: "Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS"

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Social movements are emotionally charged. All politics are. Whether one is campaigning door to door for a candidate or rioting in the streets, there are emotional undercurrents beneath every political action. The way those feelings inform what activists do, how they organize, how they sustain themselves, how they come into or leave movements, has not been explored enough in popular discussion of social movements.

Perhaps that's because these feelings are invisible, occurring on an individual level that gets obscured by the allure of group activity and mass communication. It might be because of the Marxist left's historical materialism which places economic considerations above all else, downplaying the ways that emotions shape human activity. Or maybe it's because of the awkward dance of rationality and irrationality that all of us participate in, where we explain away our emotional expressions and outbursts with logic that never quite does the mysterious stirrings of the heart/mind/body justice.

In her book *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*, Deborah Gould explores the emotional meaning of activism through the story of ACT UP. She asks, how did feelings influence queer people's political responses to HIV/AIDS? In doing so, Gould not only offers answers to these important questions, but she also writes an in depth, critical history of radical AIDS activism in the '80s and '90s, something that, up to this point, has not been done. For that reason alone, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in the ongoing AIDS crisis,
queer militancy, activism around healthcare, and the roots of global justice movement of the late '90s and early 2000's.

Beyond that, Gould's book is an emotional map of a social movement. It maps a geography of feeling that can be a model for future works on activism. Moving Politics gives activists a new way to understand ourselves, our comrades, our predecessors, and our politics.

Deborah Gould is an activist, researcher, and professor of Women's Study and Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh. She was a member of ACT UP/Chicago for many years, and was involved with AIDS activism from the late eighties until ACT UP/Chicago's demise in 1995. She worked on issues of housing rights and gentrification with the organization Queer to the Left, and is a founding member of the activist/research group Feel Tank Chicago, which is made up of activists, artists, and academics who are interested in how emotions effect politics.

In Moving Politics, Gould explores the idea that social movements provide spaces where emotional work can be done. Looking at queer people's reactions to HIV/AIDS, she creates an emotional history of the first two decades of the epidemic.

At the heart of Gould's book is the belief that power operates, not just through ideology, repression, and discourse, but also through affect. She describes affect as people's nonconscious, unnamed experiences of bodily energy and intensity. She defines emotion as the way affect is expressed in gestures and language. Humans use emotion to express what they are feeling at any given moment, and it is what brings vague bodily intensities and sensations into the realm of cultural meaning. Ideology and discourse emerge from and take hold of people partially through how they relate to affect and emotions, and affective states can be manipulated and harnessed to fit the objectives of power. Looking at power through the lens of affect and emotion illuminates processes of activism, and helps us understand social movements in new ways.

Fear, Grief, and Ambivalence

This is exactly what Gould does in her text, beginning with the early days of AIDS. In the early- to mid-eighties, people with AIDS, their friends and lovers, community activists, and sympathetic medical professionals worked within an extremely hostile environment to provide care and services to people with AIDS. They created AIDS service organizations, did emergency care taking, and invented safe sex, even before the infectious agent causing AIDS, HIV, was identified. In addition to this direct action, queers lobbied for government funding of AIDS research and treatment. The dominant emotional theme of these years was evident in the candlelight vigils that were common then. These were times of intense sadness, fear, and loss.

But those were not the only emotions at work. Gould writes that gay and lebian ambivalence was an integral part of these early years. Looking at the complicated interplay of queer pride and shame, she defines this ambivalence as "a contradictory constellation of simultaneously felt positive and negative affective states about both homosexuality and dominant, heteronormative society" (Gould, 12). It played out in a number of ways. For example, there was a feeling among some people in the gay and lebian communities that AIDS was a response, maybe metaphysical, maybe biological, to the sexual liberation of the '70s and early '80s. This led to a sex-negativism
and internalized homophobia that confirmed straight stereotypes of queers, a queer shame that restricted the political possibilities of the time. But the pride that had been bubbling up from the late sixties could not be ignored. Gay and lesbian pride informed projects like AIDS service organizations, lobbying efforts, and the development of safer sex, which were all products of queer self-reliance within a homophobic culture that couldn't care less if queers were dying mysteriously en masse.

*Rage, Pride, and Indignation*

Towards the middle of the eighties, there was a shift in the emotional tone of activism around AIDS. Anger became more prevalent as the bodies piled up and the government remained passive. Homophobia and queer bashing, in the streets, the media, and the courts, sparked rage, as well. The 1986 Supreme Court decision in the Hardwick case, which upheld the constitutionality of Georgia's anti-sodomy law, was an important catalyst for queer rage. The Hardwick case was about the rights of police officers to enter private homes if they suspected "homosexual sodomy" was being committed, and to arrest those engaging in it. According to the highest court of the US, this was totally fine. The Supreme Court opinion declared that "there is no such thing as a fundamental right to commit homosexual sodomy. . . Condemnation of those practices are firmly rooted in Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards . . . To hold that the act of homosexual sodomy is somehow protected as a fundamental right would be to cast aside millenia (sic) of moral teaching." (121)

Gould writes that this was experienced as a declaration of war against queer people and that the response was more anger-driven than any queer activism had been for nearly a decade. Queers protested across the country, and turned to militant actions that came from an emotional place of rage. For example, the night after the Hardwick decision came down, three thousand queers protested in Greenwich Village, blocking traffic and sitting in the streets. A Fourth of July celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the Statue of Liberty was disrupted by ten thousand protesters. The celebration's participants, which included Ronald and Nancy Reagan and several Supreme Court justices, were confronted by chants of "civil rights or civil war!"

There was anger in the earlier years of the AIDS epidemic as well, but Gould writes that it was channeled differently. In the early- to mid-eighties, anger was transformed into love and care for sick friends and lovers, and in facing death with stoic nobility. But after Hardwick, "no one submerged or redirected the anger; along with other feeling states, that anger animated protesters' efforts to evade police barricades, march toward the Fourth of July celebration, and confront straight America with queer fury" (125). Protests continued throughout the summer and fall of 1986, as did calls for militant political activism. Even the relatively tame Advocate featured an editorial calling for massive and widespread acts of civil disobedience, declaring that "the time for gay rage is now!" (127)

It was in this context that ACT UP was created in March 1987. In a discussion following a speech by activist Larry Kramer in at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York, angry queers committed to start a new organization to fight AIDS, and two days later, 300 people turned out for the first meeting of ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. Two weeks later, they held
their first action. Targeting the FDA and pharmaceutical companies for profiting from the AIDS epidemic, ACT UP shut down Wall Street, tangling up traffic in downtown Manhattan for hours and leading to the arrest of seventeen activists.

Queer rage was reaching a breaking point in 1987. ACT UP created a space to express that rage and act on it. They started each meeting with an affirmation: “We are ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. We’re a diverse coalition of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.” Through disruptive demonstrations, civil disobedience actions, die-ins, and other modes of intervention, activists in ACT UP used their rage to stop business as usual in the face of exponentially expanding AIDS deaths.

Gould points out that there were more emotions involved in formation of militant political activism around AIDS than just anger. One was a sense of indignation. She defines indignation as a kind of anger that stems from the feeling that one has suffered an injustice; “It is a form of outrage that stems from being spurned or rejected after having thought that you were a member of the club and thus entitled to membership rights and privileges” (143). The Hardwick decision called into question not just the constitutional rights of queers but their status as human beings. Hardwick and the (non)response to AIDS indicated that queers were not entitled to rights of privacy, quality medical care, or housing, and that the government was ready to watch massive amounts of gay men, people of color, and intravenous drug users die before they were willing to recognize their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There was also a tangible shift from gay and lesbian ambivalence to militant queer pride.

Many members of ACT UP were privileged in one way or another. There was, and still is, an assumption that ACT UP was a white, gay, male organization. While many ACT UP members fit this demographic, certainly not all did, and focusing on the white gay men of the movement ignores the presence and leadership of women, people of color, and working-class people within ACT UP. Nonetheless, there was a very particular kind of indignation that existed within ACT UP, that of people who had experienced privileges under white supremacy, patriarchy, and classism, suddenly having the rug pulled out from under them, and realizing that their privileges were not going to help them in the face of AIDS. The societal inclusion that some ACT UP members may have experienced as white, male, middle- or upper-class, were revealed to be precarious, and power once experienced seemed to slip away as the AIDS crisis rolled on.

Overall, the Hardwick decision and the continuing expansion of the AIDS crisis transformed the response to AIDS within queer communities. The dominant emotions of the early- to mid-’80s—grief, fear, ambivalence—were supplanted by anger and indignation. The shifts in emotional context and political climate that occurred in 1986 and 1987 expanded political horizons for queers, people with AIDS, and their allies. New affective states led to new visions of what was politically possible, and what tactics were acceptable and useful in realizing those visions. A space was carved out for militancy, which had been absent during the earliest days of the crisis.

ACT UP grew, spreading to different cities throughout the world throughout the late eighties. More and more militant actions took place, and the movement experienced some important victories. For example, on October 11, 1988, ACT UP members shut down the FDA in Rockville, MD. They demanded that the FDA expedite its drug-approval process, allow more people access to AIDS drugs that were deemed safe but were still undergoing trials, enroll people from all affected populations in drug trials, and end the use of placebos in these tests. Activists held die-ins, blocked the building’s entrances, snuck into the building and hung banners from it, burned effigies
of Reagan and did street theater outside, stopping business as usual for the nine hours the demonstrations lasted. One week later, the FDA announced plans to speed up the approval process for drugs to treat AIDS and other life-threatening diseases, made experimental drugs available before their full effectiveness was established, and cut the testing time by as much as 50 percent. Within a year of the demonstrations, researchers had, for the most part, stopped using placebos in AIDS drugs trials, instead comparing experimental drugs against the already approved AZT.

Victories like this demonstrated the power of direct action and militant protest to make real changes. Activists were elated. Gould indicates that there was a strong sense of optimism at this time that street activism could fundamentally change the course of the AIDS crisis, and that groups like ACT UP could help prolong and potentially save lives of people living with AIDS. Beyond joy and hope, Gould writes that ACT UP activists experienced the empowerment that comes with political effectiveness. Describing an action she was part of in Chicago that led to the Cook County Hospital opening its AIDS ward to women the very next day, Gould writes "we felt euphoric . . . because we were able to experience, to viscerally feel, our collective power to make change. I remember marveling at the instant effectiveness of our activism, feeling like we really might be able to save lives" (407).

Despair, Betrayal, Acceptance and Anxiety

That hope, though, was unstable, and as the '90s began, activists oscillated between optimism and pessimism. New emotional states took hold; despondency and despair over accumulating AIDS deaths, hopelessness about the ability of medical breakthroughs to cure or slow down AIDS, and anxiety over whether militancy was helping or hurting queers and people with AIDS. A reality existed that was difficult to fathom. As Gould puts it, "street activism has been tried and had worked up to a point, and yet the epidemic was continuing, unabated" (405). It was far from clear how to proceed, but protests continued, and ACT UP kept growing.

The early nineties saw a simultaneous increase in queer bashing and in societal tolerance for and visibility of gay men and lesbians. AIDS activists and queer community leaders grappled with these contradictions, and attempted to find their footing within a new social context. In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected president, amidst promises to the gay and lesbian communities of increased federal AIDS funding and of a commitment to take queer concerns seriously. In addition, some members of ACT UP/New York's Treatment and Data Committee gained access to FDA scientists and AIDS researchers that they'd previously targeted at protests, and their opinions were being taken into consideration in the development of policy around AIDS.

All these in-roads into mainstream acceptability for queer folks produced anxiety around the role of militant direct action to end the AIDS crisis. Mainstream gay and lesbian organizations, publications, and leaders who just a few years earlier had supported ACT UP began to criticize them, saying that queer militancy threatened the respectability that many in the community had achieved. While the sense of what was politically mature and feasible in the late eighties pointed to confrontation, in the early nineties, some folks moved towards political participation within socially acceptable arenas like electoral politics and lobbying. Gould describes this as a push toward
moderation.

Beyond political concerns, daily life for many people in ACT UP was simply physically and emotionally draining. In addition to planning and participating numerous demonstrations, members of ACT UP took care of themselves and one another, in forms of "direct action" not normally recognized as such. They

"visited friends and fellow activists in the hospital; changed diapers and cleaned bed sores; drove friends to doctor appointments; watched lovers be reduced to needing help to eat and go to the bathroom; feared serocoverting and getting sick; felt guilty about being unable to stand the thought of visiting yet another friend in the hospital; learned how to hook up a catheter; helped friends move into hospice; learned about more friends testing HIV-positive; listened as loved ones said they had decided to stop taking their meds; went to memorial service after memorial service; stopped knowing what to say or how to help; helped lovers and friends kill themselves". (421-422)

It was in this context that ACT UP began to lose steam. In 1992, there was a split in the organization, and members of the Treatment and Data Committee of ACT UP split off to form the Treatment and Action Group. Disagreements over the best course of action and focus of activities led to intense arguments within ACT UP. A major disagreement was about whether the main focus of ACT UP should be getting drugs into bodies, or fighting for healthcare rights for all people living with HIV. Many women and people of color within the group felt that the white men in it were not taking their needs seriously enough. Gould describes the sense of betrayal among activists at that time, and a climate where arguments that could have been worked out in the past became deal breakers at this point. ACT UP began to decline, and branches shut down. Though it still exists today, it is not the same mass movement as it used to be.

Moving Politics is successful on two levels. First, it is a fantastic history of ACT UP, and, to my knowledge, the only comprehensive one there is. Second, it creates a model for understanding social movements and activism as emotionally charged, and allows for re-examining current and past struggles through an emotional lens. It opens up new ways to understand politics and power that are rooted in an understanding of movements as complex entities made up of individuals who are emotional creatures. Through this perspective, we can both draw emotional maps of historical movements to better understand them, and make activism we do now more effective. Additionally, by taking emotions seriously, we can make activism more nourishing to ourselves and others, and make social movements spaces where societal change and emotional expression and satisfaction can happen simultaneously.

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