

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

THE EFFECTS OF IDENTITY AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS ON THE SUCCESS  
AND FAILURES OF THE ACTIVIST GROUP AIDS COALITION TO UNLEASH POWER  
(ACT-UP)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper will provide a comprehensive analysis of the social movement headed by the group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). The ineffective governmental response to the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980s prompted the formation of an activist group dedicated to securing government intervention on behalf of AIDS victims, reforms for the production of AIDS treatment drugs, and challenging the underlying heterosexism found in political, economic and social structures. In my paper I will explain the material conditions that prompted the formation of ACT-UP, the use of artwork and direct action demonstrations to build consciousness in the gay community, and the negative effects of narrowing political consciousness. I will also discuss the impact of socio-economic and gay identity on the tactics of ACT-UP. Lastly, I will discuss the successes and failures of ACT-UP's primary objectives. In my paper, I am arguing that although ACT-UP successfully materialized their goals relating to AIDS treatment, research, and education, the movement dissolved in 1993 because of the organization's narrowed political consciousness and narrowed collective identity.

## **Introduction to ACT-UP**

Social movements consist of an organized action by groups within a specific society. A social movement desires to change the status quo of a given community. Social movements use ideology to influence their society and accomplish primary objectives. However, not all social movements succeeded in their objectives. To analyze the successes and failures of a social movement one must analyze a social movement in its relation to historical context. I have chosen to analyze the factors affecting the success and disintegration of the group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT-UP, as an agent of change.

A terminal virus wreaked havoc on the American population during the late 1970s and 1980s. By the late 1980s, the virus appeared predominantly among the gay communities across the nation.<sup>1</sup> Despite also affecting various racial and ethnic groups, hemophiliacs, and extraneous drug users, United States society associated the virus with the gay community. In 1981, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that unusual clusters, Pneumocystis Pneumonia, appeared in five homosexual males in Los Angeles. Other opportunistic diseases like Kaposi's sarcoma appeared in otherwise healthy individuals. Initially, the CDC labeled the immune deficiency as the Gay-related immune deficiency or GRID. The CDC changed the name to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome when the organization learned half of the people identified with the virus were not homosexuals.<sup>2</sup>

The early name of AIDS represented only one example of heterosexism of the government during the 1980s. It took until 1987 for President Ronald Wilson Reagan to mention the word AIDS in public. Reagan justified his lack of leadership during the AIDS crisis by

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control, "HIV and AIDS---United States, 1981-2000," *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 50 (June, 01, 2001): 430-434.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control, "Opportunistic infections and Kaposi's sarcoma among Haitians in the United States," *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 31 (1982): 353-354; 360-361

claiming that his committees informed him that AIDS only affected homosexuals and extraneous drug users. The president's campaign supporters like Rev. Jerry Falwell and Pat Buchanan argued that AIDS represented God's or nature's revenge on homosexuals. In response to these opinions the homosexual community argued that the United States government supported individuals who reinforced heterosexism in United States Society. This heterosexism prevented the Reagan administration from taking action in lieu of the AIDS crisis.<sup>3</sup>

The Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) approval process for new drugs created a necessary material condition for the development of ACT-UP. In order for a new drug to go on to the market, the FDA conducted a series of lengthy tests and trials. In the first trials, the FDA scientists test the drug on animals to prove that the drug would not create an "unreasonable risk of harm in humans." Then the drug must go through three phase trials where clinical studies on humans determine the dosage of the drug and the side effects of the drug. After the scientists completed the three phase trials they submitted the trial results to FDA medical officers, chemists, statisticians and pharmacologists. This personnel team determined the safety and effectiveness of the drug. If the FDA team of experts approved the drug, than the drug company could market it to the populace. Naturally, it took years of research, testing, and reformulating of the AIDS treatment drug AZT for it to become available to those afflicted with the virus.<sup>4</sup> The slow process of drug approval created a situation where otherwise privileged gay white, males, could not receive support or treatment for the disease.

Born out of desperate conditions, ACT-UP formed in New York and expanded to other cities in an effort to address the AIDS crisis and force government intervention. Political consciousness remained a key factor in ACT-UP's successful recruitment of activists. The term

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<sup>3</sup> Allen White, "Reagan's AIDS Legacy: Silence=Death," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 8, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> United States Department of Health and Human Services, "FDA's Approval Process," <http://www.dhhs.gov/asl/testify/t040401.html> {accessed October 26, 2008}.

“political consciousness” relates to the process of how a societal group will interpret, analyze and act on power and dominance in society. Consciousness develops as a response to societal systems of privilege and oppression. These systems include racism, sexism, and classism and/or heterosexism. In United States society groups gain privilege through interacting systems of oppression. For example, a white male in United States society attains privilege because of racism and sexism inherent in the United States social, political and economic system. While some societal groups may gain privilege from these systems of oppression some individuals may suffer from these same systems of oppression.<sup>5</sup> In the case of ACT-UP, I explored how the social movement responded to multiple systems of oppression.

Morris notes that these dominant systems of oppression create a hegemonic power structure. The systems of oppression promote ideas of the dominant class that justify their privilege. Oppressed classes accept and adhere to these ideas, thus they remain unwitting accomplices in their own oppression. The term “false consciousness” relates to an individual’s support of societal structures which oppress them. Societal groups use consciousness of oppression in order to build their own hegemonic structures around their ideas. Consciousness seeks to replace the existing dominant power structures with “new”, or opposing, dominant power structures.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in my paper I analyze how ACT-UP used consciousness to build new hegemonic structures in society.

Successful consciousness in collective action, or social movements of today, must identify and adapt to various systems of oppression. Consciousness in a social movement must develop solutions which address interlocking systems of oppression. Morris labels these

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<sup>5</sup> Aldon D Morris, “Political Consciousness and Collective Action,” in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, eds. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1992), 351-360.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, “Political Consciousness and Collective Action,” 361-364.

solutions or alternatives to the present oppression as oppositional consciousness.<sup>7</sup> The term deconstructs political consciousness into specific areas regarding individual systems of oppression. Generally, oppressed social groups develop a broader oppositional consciousness than a singular consciousness based on one area of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Therefore, to label a movement a class consciousness movement or race consciousness movement devalues the complexity of the social movement. In my paper, I describe how ACT-UP responded to multiple systems of oppression and ACT-UP's development of multiple oppositional consciousnesses.<sup>8</sup>

The term "oppositional consciousness" remains distinctively different from the term "opposition." For example, the term "oppositional consciousness" specifically refers to the challenging of oppressive structures with an alternative societal structure, where as, the term "opposition" refers to any action against the oppressive structure with no alternative advanced by the individual or group. "Opposition" includes anything inside or outside of ACT-UP that challenges the system. In my paper, I use the term "oppositional consciousness" to specifically address the challenges to oppressive structures in society that promoted an alternative system.<sup>9</sup>

Along with developing oppositional consciousness, ACT-UP used collective identity to develop cohesion in the particular goals and aims of the movement. As Larry J. Ray notes in his book *Rethinking Critical Theory*, current social movements, like ACT-UP, promote specific objectives on developing identity. Often social movements contain networks of people working together to promote consciousness-rising activities. These networks of people create a specific identity which bonds the group together. In general, identity and consciousness in a movement

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<sup>7</sup> Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," 361-364

<sup>8</sup> Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action," 362-365.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

appear intertwined despite representing two distinct roles.<sup>10</sup> For example, ACT used oppositional consciousness as an initial critique of existing structures of oppression and identity as a means to connect individuals of similar cultural backgrounds. However, as I will explain in my paper, ACT-UP also let identity influence the tactics of a movement.

ACT-UP promoted a specific culture among individuals in its social movement and used tactics influenced by a certain identity. As Ray notes culture in a social movement includes lifestyles, organization of civil society, language, religious beliefs, etc.<sup>11</sup> Similar to present social movements ACT-UP defined a system of values, developed administrative structures within the movement, and used certain tactics to build the consciousness of a movement. These values, administrative structures, and tactics defined the identity of ACT-UP. I will explain in my paper how ACT-UP's cultural base influenced their adoption of certain administrative systems and tactics.

The values of ACT-UP represented the abstract cultural identity of social movement; where as, the administrative structures and group tactics represented the material manifestation of these abstract values. Identity influenced tactics of ACT-UP included artwork and language which advocate struggle for a particular cause. Not only did ACT-UP use tactics representative of their identity, but they only targeted individuals who contributed to their collective identity. In general, the artwork and language of ACT-UP reflected the "politics of identity."<sup>12</sup> As the critical theorist Theodor Adorno surmises: the artwork within a social movement reflects the

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<sup>10</sup> Larry J Ray, *Rethinking critical theory: emancipation in the age of global social movements* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 58-61.

<sup>11</sup> Ray, *Rethinking critical theory*, 59

<sup>12</sup> Ray, *Rethinking critical theory*, 58-61.

ongoing struggle between the group and opposing structure.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in my paper I will analyze how ACT-UP used an identity, or culture, in their tactics to develop consciousness.

ACT-UP used identity as the focus of consciousness raising actions and gradually lost support. As with accepting a variety of oppositional consciousnesses, a movement must tolerate diverse identities. Tolerance of diverse identities within a social movement allowed for a diverse array of tactics of consciousness building and activism. Limiting the identity of the social movement, served to build cohesion, but it proved disastrous at creating a power structure that challenged the status quo.<sup>14</sup> For ACT-UP, identity alienated potential supporters of the social movement. Thus in my paper I examine how the influence of identity negatively affected ACT-UP's movement.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP) represented a significant and influential twentieth century social movement for the gay community during the AIDS crisis. ACT-UP began in 1987 and appeared defunct by 1993. However, within this limited time span ACT-UP effectively provided an alternative to government negligence of the AIDS crisis, but failed to change the dominant power structures of society.<sup>15</sup> I used transcribed interviews of ACT-UP members and newspaper articles as my primary resources for analyzing the movement. I also used a variety of secondary source material to support and contextualize my primary source material.

Through a combination of primary and secondary source materials, I gained insight concerning the factors contributing to ACT-UP's success and factors contributing to ACT-UP's

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor W Adorno, "How to look at Television," in *Critical theory: The essential readings*, eds. David Ingram and Julia Simon-Ingram (New York: Paragon House, 1992) 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Holland,, Gretchen Fox and Vinci Daro, "Social Movements and Collective Identity: A Decentered Dialogic View," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81 (Winter 2008), 100-125.

<sup>15</sup> T.V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 180-215.

dissolution. ACT-UP developed out of inability of the government or corporations to deal with the rapid spread of the terminal AIDS virus. ACT-UP New York achieved success in their primary objectives of lowering the price of AIDS treatment drugs, and achieving greater numbers of programs dedicated to AIDS prevention. However, before ACT-UP could materialize their goal of eliminating heterosexism in United States society, the movement dissolved in 1993 because of the organization's narrowed political consciousness and narrowed collective identity.

### **The formation of ACT-UP in New York**

ACT-UP owed its existence to the burgeoning gay-rights activism of the 1970s. Prior to ACT-UP, the gay and lesbian community challenged the definitions of family to include gay and lesbian couples.<sup>16</sup> Resistance also focused on the prevailing homophobia in the United States and discrimination faced at the hands of employers and political officials. The resistance tactics among individuals often mirrored resistance found in the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s. Police clashes with passive and active members of the gay and lesbian community, Guerilla Theater productions, and debates between gay activists and political officials attempted to resist heterosexism and discrimination in society.<sup>17</sup> These tactics later influenced the direct action tactics of ACT-UP and the formation of oppositional consciousness to heterosexism in society.

The formation of ACT-UP depended, a large part, on the gay rights activist Larry Kramer. Activist and a playwright among other things, Larry Kramer preferred to focus his

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Hequembourg and Jorge Ardit, "Fractured Resistances: The Debate over Assimilationism among Gays and Lesbians in the United States," *The Sociological Quarterly* 40 (Autumn 1999), 663-664.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 666-667

individual resistance of heterosexism through the medium of writing. As early as 1985, Kramer predicted the AIDS crisis for the gay community through his novels and plays. One play in particular, “The Normal Heart,” had gained wide spread attention after examining the taboo topic of AIDS in gay community.<sup>18</sup> Fearing the impending crisis of AIDS, Kramer founded the largest mainstream lobbying group for gay males in New York City. He named the group the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC).<sup>19</sup> The rising cases of AIDS in the Gay Community and government inaction prompted Larry Kramer to call for societal pressure. In March of 1987, Larry Kramer gave a rousing speech to the gay and lesbian community in which he called for direct action against social and governmental neglect of the AIDS crisis.<sup>20</sup> ACT-UP formed days later as a “diverse nonpartisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.”<sup>21</sup> Larry Kramer provided the initial spark for a social movement demanding governmental and societal treatment of the AIDS crisis.

Larry Kramer attributed ACT-UP’s rapid growth to the structure of the movement’s administration. For example, several structural differences existed between ACT-UP and the GMHC, which impacted each groups’ growth. Kramer explained that GMHC developed into a highly structuralized organization. Every program, lobbying attempt, and job in the organization underwent an extensive approval process. As a result, GMHC spent more time approving legal, social, or political programs than actually accomplishing their objectives. The rules intended to create organized democratic structures; however, the rules also debilitated the process of achieving GMHC’s objectives. Kramer argued that by having autonomous committees within ACT-UP, with a loose centralized direction, the movement could accomplish more. In other

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<sup>18</sup> “In Defense of Larry Kramer,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> Alex Witchel, “At Home With: Larry Kramer; When a roaring lion learns to purr,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 180-182.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

words, a decentralized movement would prove more effective than a highly centralized one. Thus having a decentralized movement represented the main structural difference between ACT-UP and GMHC. Kramer attributed the flexibility of a decentralized structure to the success of ACT-UP in rapidly growing in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>22</sup>

Larry Kramer also noted that use of civil disobedience remained a key difference between GMHC and ACT-UP. Kramer viewed GMHC as failing because of its emphasis on providing bureaucratic services through lobbying and lawsuits. Kramer argued that although these tactics had won concessions from the government and pharmaceutical corporations, the concessions moved at such a slow pace, they did nothing to stem the tide of the rising deaths associated with AIDS. The discussion during the first meeting confirmed the group's use of "direct action" in order to address the AIDS crisis. Kramer and the group believed that since working solely within the establishment produced little if any results, the activist group should focus on creating a dual nature where ACT-UP used civil disobedience to entice government officials and pharmaceutical companies into negotiation with ACT-UP. However, at the time, ACT-UP focused its resources on disrupting the systems of power through civil disobedience and creating consciousness through action.<sup>23</sup>

## **The development of political consciousness within ACT-UP**

### ***The Influence of Material Conditions in the Development of Political Consciousness***

ACT-UP gained support by developing an oppositional consciousness to the government's and pharmaceutical companies' bureaucratic structures. Initially, the movement

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<sup>22</sup> Larry Kramer Interview, interview by Sarah Schulman, 15 November 2003, Interview 035, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 10-13.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Kramer Interview, 12-13.

focused on criticizing and replacing the existing government and economic structures preventing access to drug treatments for AIDS. Given the accelerating pace of AIDS infection and the terminal nature of the virus, ACT-UP desired a solution that would transcend the formalities inherent in the bureaucracies of the pharmaceutical companies and the F.D.A. Consequently, the oppositional consciousness of ACT-UP focused on challenging and replacing the bureaucratic entanglements that prevented access to treatment drugs. As Peter Staley, a core member of ACT-UP New York, noted in an interview, ACT-UP wanted access to drugs, a quicker approval process for drugs, and the bypassing of the FDA's approval process when giving experimental drugs to individuals. Furthermore, Staley explained that ACT-UP, especially ACT-UP's think tank Treatment and Data, developed mechanisms and political and economic structures that shortened the approval process and granted wider access to AIDS's treatment drugs, like AZT. These new structures served to challenge the ineffective structures of the status quo.<sup>24</sup>

ACT-UP's oppositional consciousness to government and pharmaceutical company bureaucratic delays in drug access developed rapidly because material conditions. The development of an oppositional consciousness in ACT-UP depended on material conditions that had left little opportunity to accept the status quo. In three years ACT-UP created branches in over sixty cities due to the rapid spread and terminal nature of the AIDS virus.<sup>25</sup> Minimal media coverage and minimal attention from the Reagan administration created an atmosphere where privileged, homosexual white males felt isolated from the very system they helped create. This

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Staley Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 9 December 2006, interview 067, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 32-34

<sup>25</sup> "AIDS and Misdirected Rage," *New York Times*, March 7, 1990; Margaret Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement, Revolutionary Thought/Radical Movements* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1992), 76.

isolation, lack of public policy and the increasing death toll contributed to the rapid development of oppositional consciousnesses.<sup>26</sup>

To exacerbate an already desperate situation, those in the gay community afflicted by AIDS found traditional avenues of lobbying ineffective. Groups like the GMHC proved unable to acquire federal money for medical research into either AIDS or public policy regarding AIDS education.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as Staley noted, figures like Ellen Cooper, and F.D.A official, proved too strict in their adherence to bureaucratic structures involving drug approval. The slow pace of drug approval could not adapt to the rapid and terminal spread of the AIDS virus. The inability of the government to accommodate to the needs of a particular group reinforced views of the government as illegitimate and in need of reform.<sup>28</sup> ACT-UP used this frustration to garner support for their alternative structures and civil disobedience tactics. With traditional avenues of lobbying appearing incapable of reforming the FDA's and pharmaceutical company's bureaucracy, support grew for ACT-UP's oppositional consciousness.

Not only did ACT-UP seek an alternative to ineffective government and pharmaceutical company bureaucracy, ACT-UP opposed United States society's disenfranchisement and stigmatism of the gay community. Maxine Wolfe, one of the top female members of ACT-UP, noted in an interview, that AIDS conferences, like ACT NOW, grouped people with AIDS together across the nation in order to develop a program for dealing with the crisis. However, these conferences did not address the relation between heterosexism and AIDS. ACT-UP found this inconceivable considering that gay males represented majority of people dying from the AIDS virus. The conferences' negligence in addressing heterosexism influenced ACT-UP to

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<sup>26</sup> Peter F. Cohen, "All they needed": Aids, consumption, and the politics of class," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* (July, 1997): 86-87.

<sup>27</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 180-182.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 42-43.

develop a comprehensive critique of heterosexism's relation to the AIDS crisis.<sup>29</sup> Thus, ACT-UP developed an oppositional consciousness that opposed any structures inside the government and society that promoted heterosexism.

### ***The use of Artwork to Develop Political Consciousness***

Along with material conditions, ACT-UP developed consciousness among the gay community through artwork. ACT-UP utilized artwork that related to the “gay community” in an attempt to spark consciousness regarding AIDS. For example, ACT-UP’s slogan “Silence=Death”, which they put on posters, flyers, and leaflets, created consciousness within the gay community and contributed to its accelerating membership. Vincent Galigrosto, a member of ACT-UP who developed the posters for ACT-UP, worked with a group of artists to develop the “Silence=Death” slogan. Avram Finkelstein, a graphic designer and artist, directed the group and labeled it the “Silence=Death Project.”<sup>30</sup>

The “Silence=Death Project” used symbols associated with the gay community. These symbols included the pink triangle or the rainbow. ACT-UP used these symbols to build consciousness in the organization and a strong sense of identity.<sup>31</sup> Though a discussion of identity will follow later in the paper, I must stress the importance of identity in rapidly developing oppositional consciousness. In an attempt to build consciousness and appeal to identity, ACT-UP used postmodern art in their posters. ACT-UP intended to use the art to provoke thought. For example, in their artwork ACT-UP targeted any official they felt

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<sup>29</sup> Maxine Wolfe Interview, interviewed by Jim Hubbard, 19 February 2004, interview 043, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 55-59.

<sup>30</sup> Vincent Galigrosto Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, July 8, 2005, interview 064, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 22-23.

<sup>30</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 202-206.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Morgan, “Mainstream Strategy for AIDS Group,” *New York Times*, July 22, 1988.

contributed to heterosexism and the disenfranchisement of the gay community. These officials included the president Ronald Reagan, the mayor of New York Ed. Koch, and A.J. Sheppard- the C.E.O of Burroughs Wellcome which made AIDS treatment AZT.<sup>32</sup>

### ***The use of Direct Action in order to build Political Consciousness***

Early civil disobedience demonstrations of ACT-UP encouraged individuals to develop oppositional consciousness. The first civil disobedience action occurred at Burroughs Wellcome in 1968. Burroughs Wellcome produced the AIDS treatment drug AZT. ACT-UP targeted Burroughs Wellcome because it priced a year's supply of pills AZT at \$10,000. The high price inspired Peter Staley, Blaine Mosely, and James McGrath to organize a protest at the headquarters of Burroughs Wellcome in April of 1988. According to Staley's interview, the demonstration at the NYCE occurred because of a previous meeting with the representative of Burroughs Wellcome Dave Berry. Peter Staley attempted to negotiate a price decrease in the AIDS treatment drug AZT in January of 1988; however, Dave Berry refused to negotiate a lower price.<sup>33</sup>

When Burroughs Wellcome refused to lower the price, a group of ten ACT-UP members responded by staging a demonstration in the offices of the Burroughs Wellcome. Seven members of ACT-UP, including Staley, moved past the security at the headquarters of Burroughs Wellcome by donning "socially acceptable" suits and ties. Once inside, ACT UP members used screws and power drills to seal themselves in one of the offices. According to Staley, the sympathetic press coverage by local stations generated public support for ACT-UP's goals. Furthermore, Staley explained that ACT-UP began to not only attract new members to its

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<sup>32</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 191-202.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 42-43

program, but pharmaceutical companies recognized ACT-UP as a powerful organization. Shortly after the demonstration, Burroughs Wellcome decreased the price of AZT. ACT-UP took most of the credit for the price decrease along with several other AIDS activist groups working in coalition with the demonstration.<sup>34</sup>

The New York Stock Exchange (NYCE) demonstration on March 24, 1988 followed ACT-UP's civil disobedience at Burroughs-Wellcome. In their interviews, Staley and Galigrostro provided a detailed the account of their participation in demonstration. After the demonstration at Burroughs-Wellcome lowered the price of AZT, ACT-UP planned to accelerate its program of reforming or changing the bureaucratic structures of the state by continuing to use "direction action" in their demonstrations. ACT-UP picked the New York Stock Exchange because they felt that the stock traders adhered to the same "profits over people" ideology as the pharmaceutical companies.<sup>35</sup> For example, Galigrostro and other ACT-UP members prepared for the demonstration by creating fake dollars displaying an artistic design depicting Burroughs Wellcolme as a criminal enterprise and the slogan: "fuck your profiteering, we die while you make money."<sup>36</sup>

While inside the NYCE, ACT members used civil disobedience tactics to develop consciousness. The members used a banner, foghorn and bells to attract attention of the traders on the floor. The group then distributed the fake currency on the floor and attempted to disrupt the opening of the NYCE.<sup>37</sup> When the NYCE tried to open at 9:30 a.m. ACT-UP members used their foghorns and signs to cause confusion among the traders on the floor. The ACT-UP members handcuffed themselves to a banister in the balcony of the NYCE. Raging traders

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 42-43

<sup>35</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 42-43.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 47; Vincent Galigrostro Interview, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent Galigrostro Interview 29.

attempted to dislodge ACT-UP members by yelling and throwing wads of paper at the demonstrators. Eventually, the New York City police arrested all ACT-UP members demonstrating at the NYCE.<sup>38</sup>

The NYCE demonstration resulted in lowering drug treatment costs, more press coverage and recruitment of new members. Although the share price of Burroughs-Wellcome only marginally dropped, the demonstration led to a reduction in AZT price by twenty percent.<sup>39</sup> Newspaper photographers at the NYCE photographed the hostility of the traders toward the ACT-UP demonstrators. These photographs put ACT-UP on front page news in the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal. With more press coverage, ACT-UP generated more support for their objectives among those in the AIDS afflicted gay community. By having their message printed in high circulating newspapers, ACT-UP reached individuals otherwise isolated from organization advancing their needs.<sup>40</sup> Thus, like the Burroughs-Wellcome demonstration, ACT-UP's civil disobedience in the NYCE encouraged the spread of oppositional consciousness to the bureaucracy of the government and pharmaceutical companies.

The third famous ACT-UP protest occurred on December 10, 1989 at St. Patrick's cathedral during mass. ACT-UP targeted St. Patrick's cathedral because of the conservative messages of the church's Cardinal O'Conner. ACT-UP opposed the Cardinal O'Conner's statements condemning the distribution of clean needles to drug addicts and condoms to any sexual active couple to prevent the spread of the AIDS. ACT-UP felt the Cardinal used his clerical position to access media and promote a position that contributed to the rising death toll of AIDS.<sup>41</sup> ACT-UP joined with Women's Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!) to protest at

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 47-49.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 49-50.

<sup>41</sup> "Protest at St. Patrick's Focused on Cardinal's Dangerous Zeal," *New York Times*, December 26, 1989.

the 10:15 a.m. Catholic Mass. 4,500 people assembled outside to protest while forty-three members of ACT-UP chained themselves to pews or shouted while laying in the aisles of the church. At the end of the protest, the police had arrested a total of 111 protestors at the demonstration.<sup>42</sup>

The protest at St. Patrick's cathedral resulted in bad press coverage to ACT-UP. Jim Lyons, a lawyer who worked with ACT-UP to challenge legislation regarding the drug approval process, detailed the results of the "Stop the Church" demonstration in his interview. According to Lyons, the demonstrations at St. Patrick's cathedral by ACT-UP generated unfavorable headlines in the New York Post. For example, the New York Post implied ACT-UP's use of criminal and terrorist tactics to attack the anti-birth control and anti-homosexuality stance of the Catholic Church. The New York Times, which approved of the demonstrations at Burroughs-Wellcome and NYCE, now ran scathing editorials condemning the tactics of ACT-UP.<sup>43</sup> For example, in one editorial entitled "Storming of St. Pats", the author condemned the actions of ACT-UP as offensive. According to the author, ACT-UP's demonstration did more to discredit their argument than advance a logical solution.<sup>44</sup> Other scathing editorials denounced ACT-UP's demonstration as moving backward rather than forward in dealing with the AIDS crisis.

The demonstration at St. Patrick's cathedral also resulted in the alienation of potential supporters of the movement and a schism within ACT-UP over the targets of the movement. In the end, Lyons explained, ACT-UP's targeting of the Catholic Church alienated individuals in and out of ACT-UP who felt sympathetic toward the Catholic Church. The bad press coverage created an antagonistic atmosphere for ACT-UP to achieve success in. Furthermore, Lyons

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<sup>42</sup> Jason DeParle, "111 Held in St. Patrick's AIDS Protest," *New York Times*, December 11, 1989.

<sup>43</sup> James Lyons Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 26 February 2005, interview 063, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 27-28.

<sup>44</sup> "The Storming of St. Pat's," *New York Times*, December 12, 1989.

noted this demonstration contributed to schism between those in the movement who advocated primarily challenging political institutions, and those who advocated for challenging all political and cultural institutions that promoted homophobia.<sup>45</sup> The St. Patrick's Cathedral demonstration heralded the beginning of ACT-UP's dissolution as a cohesive social movement

### ***The Negative Effects of Narrowing Political Consciousness***

By not developing broader oppositional consciousness within ACT-UP the movement narrowed and eventually dissipated. ACT-UP focused on developing an oppositional consciousness against all authorities who ACT-UP felt contributed to the AIDS epidemic. The movement focused the oppositional consciousness on individuals like Reagan, or A.J. Sheppard. Consequently, the movement rarely stressed structural problems in society that fueled the AIDS epidemic.<sup>46</sup> This proved ineffective at garnering support from people who recognized the structural problems, but supported the Reagan administration. Furthermore, the oppositional consciousness to homophobia in society created objectives that mirrored identity politics.

By 1991 the movement suffered from internal division between those who wanted ACT-UP to advance strictly a "gay rights" agenda and those who wanted to work to improve the quality of life for all people.<sup>47</sup> ACT-UP never significantly expanded their scope of oppositional consciousness challenge systems of racism, sexism, and classism that affected those afflicted with AIDS. As Ming-Yuen S. Ma pointed out in his interview, societal groups differing from the White, Anglo-Saxon make up of ACT-UP often choose to organize on their own organizations to deal with AIDS. For example, according to Ming-Yuen S. Ma, Gay Asian and Pacific Islander Men of New York (GAPIMNY) formed primarily as an activist group for HIV positive gay

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<sup>45</sup> James Lyons Interview, 29.

<sup>46</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 202-206.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

Asian men. Likewise, the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast (ALOEC) provided an organization for activism among the HIV positive Asian lesbian community. Thus, racially diverse groups within the gay community developed their own systems of organization separate from ACT-UP.<sup>48</sup> Although ACT-UP sought to network with other societal groups affected by AIDS they never significantly integrated other racial groups into the organization. Consequently, support for the direct action demonstrations waned by 1993 when potential supporters felt alienated by the group's purported identities.<sup>49</sup> By 1993, tactics purporting a specific "gay identity" superseded ACT-UP's desire to educate all societal groups affected by AIDS and expand their oppositional consciousness.

## **The Role of Identity within ACT-UP**

### *The adoption and influences of a High Socio-Economic Identity within ACT-UP*

Socio-economic identity profoundly influenced ACT-UP. The individuals desiring social change came from a dominant class within society. The majority of activists within ACT-UP represented the white, male, and wealthy dominant class.<sup>50</sup> Eric Sawyer, a founding member of ACT-UP New York, noted that many ACT-UP members "were employed by corporate America."<sup>51</sup> For example, prior to founding ACT-UP New York in 1988, Ann Northrop worked as a journalist in 1987 for ABC Sports, Good Morning America, CBS Morning News, and

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<sup>48</sup> Ming-Yuen S. Ma Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 15 January 2003, interview 007, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 8-9.

<sup>49</sup> Reed, *Art of Protest*, 210-215.

<sup>50</sup> Cohen, "All they need," 90-91.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Sawyer, "An Act Up founder 'acts up' for Africa's access to AIDS," In *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban protest and community building in the era of globalization*, ed. Benjamin Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (London: Verso, 2002), 91.

Ladies Home Journal.<sup>52</sup> Other media experts and members of America's corporate sector included Michelangelo Signorile and Bob Rafsky.<sup>53</sup> In an interview with Peter Staley, a core member of ACT-UP New York, Staley indicated that he attended both Oberlin College and London School of Economics. Prior to joining ACT-UP Staley handled business transactions for J.P. Morgan. As Staley mentioned in his interview, a large percent of the professional class made up the core of ACT UP.<sup>54</sup> The core members of ACT-UP came from the ranks of the economically advantaged and socially mobile. Naturally, ACT-UP took on a class-status that mirrored the class-status of its core members.

ACT-UP's high class status identity influenced their tactics as an agent of change. Since the majority of activists worked in the media, arts, and corporations, the tactics used to generate consciousness reflected their socio-economic identity. ACT-UP used technology found in the corporate sector, such as telephone, fax, and e-mail, as means of organizing and staging protests and communicating with the media. ACT-UP used peaceful civil disobedience, on the advice of their members in the media, because of its ability to attract far more media coverage than rallies or street marches.<sup>55</sup> The class status of ACT-UP's members prevented violent or overtly militant activism because these tactics could have jeopardized the members' careers. Since members had high income careers outside of ACT-UP, most could afford a good lawyer and fines after their arrest. Furthermore, ACT-UP's professional class members possessed the ability to raise large amounts of money through fundraising. For example, the group could afford a communication

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<sup>52</sup> Ann Northrop, "The radical debutant," In *Making History: The Struggle from Gay and Lesbian Equal Rights 1945-1990, an Oral History*, ed. Eric Marcus (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 483.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen M. Engel, *The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 8-11.

<sup>55</sup> Eric Saywer, An Act Up founder 'acts up' for Africa's access to AIDS," 89-91.

center that developed professional posters and leaflets for demonstrators. ACT-UP could also fly out members to demonstrations across the nation, and put members in hotels for conferences.<sup>56</sup>

Along with using their high-socio economic identity to fundraise money for non-violent demonstrations, ACT-UP applied corporate culture to their administrative structures. ACT-UP members used corporate management techniques such as “expert groups” to study AIDS treatments and pharmaceutical policies. These “expert groups” could effectively debate journalists, politicians and drug companies.<sup>57</sup> As Peter Staley noted, in the early 1990s, ACT-UP replaced its decentralized administrative system with far more traditional structures. These structures contained “expert groups” which worked both inside and outside the established system.<sup>58</sup> Staley went on to explain that the debates with pharmaceutical companies and government agencies focused on complex ideas and solutions. Consequently, Staley argued, the need for business- like expert groups grew increasingly necessary.<sup>59</sup> Overall, ACT-UP’s organizational structures, like their activist tactics appeared influenced by the corporate culture of high socio-economic status.

An ideological split occurred between individuals who felt success depended on working “inside” the establishment and those who wanted to work “outside” the system. For example, Vincent Gagliostro, noted that after the demonstrations at Burroughs Wellcome and the New York Stock Exchange, pharmaceutical research companies like Burroughs Wellcome and Hoffman-La Roche offered ACT-UP a considerable amount of money to create better public relations between the two groups. A debate ensued between ACT-UP members who wanted to use the money to fund more activist demonstrations against these companies and members who

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<sup>56</sup> Peter F. Cohen, “‘All they needed’: Aids, consumption, and the politics of class, 103-106.

<sup>57</sup> Eric Sawyer, An Act Up founder ‘acts up’ for Africa’s access to AIDS,” 89-91.

<sup>58</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 57.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 58.

refused the money on philosophical reasons. This debate foreshadowed the coming debate between those who preferred negotiation and lobbying tactics and those who advocated for more militant civil disobedience.<sup>60</sup>

Peter Staley noted that under his direction, ACT-UP/ New York received substantial criticism from its members for moving in an unpopular direction with its tactics. Staley wanted ACT-UP to emphasize negotiation and lobbying with the establishment, rather than pressuring it from the outside.<sup>61</sup> Members criticized their leaders of creating small autonomous organizations within ACT-UP that led, rather than, supported the movement. In general members accused ACT-UP leaders of elitism and began to challenge the centralized administrative structure of the organization.<sup>62</sup> Galigrostro explained that dissension occurred when members directing the actions of ACT-UP wanted to use philosophy and ideology to convince the establishment to address the AIDS crisis. However, many of the rank and file members felt the true power of the group resided in activism and demonstration. Based on Galigrostro's testimony, it would appear that directors of ACT-UP, those of high socio-economic class, wanted to persuade the government and pharmaceutical companies through negotiation and philosophy rather than activism.<sup>63</sup>

By 1991, ACT-UP's high socio- economic identity influenced tactics splintered the movement. ACT-UP's tactics caused the movement to stratify because the rank and file of ACT-UP considered those involved with Treatment and Data, like Peter Staley, as elitist. For example, one of the rank and file members: Jay Bloche, said in his interview that individuals like Mark Harrington and Peter Staley, while brilliant men, possessed an arrogance which alienated

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<sup>60</sup> Vincent Galigrostro Interview, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 57.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 30-31.

some of the members. Furthermore, Treatment and Data alienated members by negotiating with pharmaceutical companies and limiting the amount of information about these negotiation meetings. In time, ACT-UP's rank and file began to distrust the autonomy of Treatment and Data.<sup>64</sup> The tension between the rank debate reached its climax when in 1991 the group Treatment and Data Committee, an expert group on AIDS pharmaceutical drugs, broke away from ACT-UP. Treatment and Data focused on achieving the group's objectives by working on the "inside" of the establishment. This contradicted the "direct action" principles of ACT-UP.<sup>65</sup>

Along with debates affecting the cohesion of the movement, ACT-UP's high socio-economic views on organizing a social movement (i.e. the plane trips, hotel lodging of members) wreaked havoc on the group's funds and effectiveness.<sup>66</sup> By 1993, ACT-UP spent more than they earned with fundraisers. No longer, could it effectively maintain constant demonstrations of civil disobedience.<sup>67</sup> Without, effective civil disobedience demonstrations, ACT-UP lost its original purpose as a militant activist group. Thus, the funds, combined with the split, contributed to the dissolution of ACT-UP as an effective social movement. ACT-UP's use of tactics influenced by a high socio-economic identity benefited the movement in the beginning. However, by the early 1990s the schism and the lack of funds brought on by high socio-economic identity tactics spelled disaster for ACT-UP's social movement.

By the end of 1993 ACT-UP followed in the Treatment and Data Committee's example. ACT-UP focused its resources on "inside" tactics rather than civil disobedience. Ultimately, socio-economic identity contributed to the disintegration of ACT-UP in the early 1990s. At the heart of the schisms in ACT-UP lay a difference in tactics used by the group. The core members

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<sup>64</sup> Jay Blotcher Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 24 April 2004, interview 067, transcript, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 8-11.

<sup>65</sup> Peter F. Cohen, "All they needed": Aids, consumption, and the politics of class," 99-102.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Peter F. Cohen, "All they needed": Aids, consumption, and the politics of class," 102.

who came from high socio-economic backgrounds intended to use civil disobedience as a vehicle for “reform politics.” As Ann Northrop noted, few in ACT-UP desired to broaden the group’s social goals to include anything that would involve radically changing the socio-economic system.<sup>68</sup> Rather, those powerful in ACT-UP wanted to attack the FDA and the NIH in order to reform, not develop an alternative structure. The rich, white, males who assumed leadership of ACT-UP felt entitled to government officials and advisory boards of drug companies. Consequently, high-socio-economic culture and administrative structures influenced tactics of reform and gradual progress. In essence, ACT-UP became another version of GHMC. Eventually, ACT-UP’s identity reshaped the tactics of the movement and contributed to its disintegration.<sup>69</sup>

#### ***The adoption and influences of a Gay identity within ACT-UP***

Along with socio-economic identity, gay identity profoundly influenced actions of ACT-UP. The AIDS epidemic in the United States created a distinct feature in formation of ACT-UP. AIDS “outed” many previously white, wealthy, gay males who hid their sexuality for years. Now the members of the previously privileged group found themselves apart of a disenfranchised and stigmatized group. Along with socio-economic status, the members felt bonded together by a “gay identity.” Politically, ACT-UP used the “gay identity” when communicating with the media, government officials, and scientists.<sup>70</sup> Many of the central figures in the movement explained they felt forced to express their homosexuality in secret prior to joining ACT-UP. However, while in ACT-UP members felt free to engage in “gay life” or

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<sup>68</sup> Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York: Perennial 2002), 320-321.

<sup>69</sup> Peter F. Cohen, “‘All they needed’: Aids, consumption, and the politics of class,” 93-98.

<sup>70</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 185-187.

“gay culture” on a daily basis and in public. The power in numbers created a cohesiveness and safety among individuals who felt constrained by the social mores of “corporate America.”<sup>71</sup>

When building consciousness and support ACT-UP focused primarily on the gay community. Along with professionals, ACT-UP attracted a large number of gay and lesbian academics, artists, and cultural theorists in an effort to aid the struggle. Consequently, ACT-UP used artwork and imagery associated with the gay community and staged theatrical productions which dealt with issues of homophobia and gay identity.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, the language that ACT-UP used in debates, posters, and pamphlets reflected the slang and slogans of the LGBT community. The art and language of ACT-UP linked the movement to a specific identity and unwittingly targeted those individuals who belonged to the “gay community.” By linking the movement to a specific identity, ACT-UP desired to create solidarity among its members.<sup>73</sup>

By focusing on promoting a “gay” identity, ACT-UP alienated those individuals who did not associate themselves with the targeted identity. ACT-UP stereotyped the “gay community” as predominately white, male, and generally middle class. It took years for females to convey their specific needs in regards to the AIDS crisis.<sup>74</sup> For example, Maxine Wolfe stated in her interview that when she joined ACT-UP in the late 1980s, a large amount of straight women appeared in the rank and file of ACT-UP. Wolfe noted that very few of these women acted as directors in ACT-UP. Furthermore, Wolfe explained that only a small minority of these women actually worked with lesbians affected by the AIDS crisis. Lesbians represented a small number

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<sup>71</sup> Peter Staley Interview, 10; James Lyon Interview, 8; Vincent Galigrostro Interview, 10; Jay Blotcher Interview, 7.

<sup>72</sup> Reed, *Art of Protest*, 191-193.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Reed, *Art of Protest*, 199-200.

of individuals in organization and, although they frequently spoke at meetings, Wolfe explained, “they did not lead any of the committees or positions of direction in ACT-UP.”<sup>75</sup>

In response to this lack of power, Wolfe helped create a Women’s Committee to support women in ACT-UP. The Women’s Committee represented an effort to give lesbians and straight women a larger voice in ACT-UP. The group met separately from the larger ACT-UP meetings and discussed women’s role in the AIDS crisis. Wolfe noted that the group did not intend to discuss “women’s issues” nor sexism within the organization, but rather functioned only to discuss projects to work on with the community in dealing with heterosexism and AIDS. Thus, although the group could have expanded the consciousness of the organization by critiquing issues of sexism within the organization it choose not too maintain the cohesiveness of the organization.<sup>76</sup>

Despite forming a committee to empower the women of ACT-UP, the women of ACT-UP often conducted demonstrations and events in isolation from the larger group. At first the group did not engage in any activism because the larger organization of ACT-UP focused their resources on tactics to raise consciousness among the gay male population. However, when large amounts of women began to die from AIDS, women in ACT-UP decided to address AIDS despite limited support from ACT-UP’s central committee. Consequently, the women in ACT-UP formed the Women’s Committee. The Women’s Committee found it necessary to address AIDS in communities containing lesbians and heterosexual women. Throughout the movement, the women’s committee began to work in isolation by leading and sponsoring events.<sup>77</sup>

After the magazine *Cosmopolit*ion published an article claiming that heterosexual women did not have to worry about AIDS, the Women’s Committee inside ACT-UP decided to protest

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<sup>75</sup> Maxine Wolfe Interview, 51-52.

<sup>76</sup> Maxine Wolfe Interview, 55.

<sup>77</sup> Maxine Wolfe Interview, 55-60

the article. Maxine Wolfe and the Women's Committee led several female ACT-UP members in a civil disobedience protest in the offices of Cosmopolitan. The members of the Women's Committee led a small group of women into the offices of Cosmopolitan and demanded to speak with the magazines editor Helen Gurly Brown. Police met the protestors outside of the doors and arrested many of the demonstrators. Although this demonstration received positive press coverage, it did not receive support from the directors of ACT-UP. The Women's Committee continued to hold conferences and demonstrations isolated from the larger ACT-UP organization.<sup>78</sup> Ultimately, this led to the alienation of women members in ACT-UP and did little to raise consciousness of women outside of ACT-UP.

For several years ACT-UP ignored the support they could have generated by appealing to heterosexuals infected with the disease. Ann Northrop, one of the few females in a position of power in ACT UP, explained that those in charge: white, gay males, wanted to secure privilege for primarily white gay males. As I stated in the chapter on socio-economic identity, since this societal group primarily controlled ACT-UP the collective identity of ACT-UP reflected that of its controllers. Thus, as Northrop explained in her interview, the movement ignored issues of AIDS among the heterosexual population. As I stated in the section on consciousness, ACT-UP's "gay identity" focused on building support in the "gay community" rather than expanding their level of support into the heterosexual community. As Northrop mentioned, this limited the movement in terms of identity. By limiting the movement's identity, ACT-UP alienated or ignored potential support from other societal groups. Consequently, these tactics contributed to the factionalism and later dissolution of ACT-UP.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Maxine Wolfe Interview, 55-60

<sup>79</sup> Ann Northrop Interview, interviewed by Sarah Schulman, 28 May 2003, interview 027, ACT-UP Oral History Project, New York, found at <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/interviews/images/staley.pdf>: 15-16.

ACT-UP as a whole did not adequately build support from intravenous drug users infected with HIV. With over 100,000 individuals diagnosed with HIV resulting from intravenous drug use, ACT-UP effectively alienated substantial support. Only a minority of ACT-UP members joined with other groups like the National AIDS Brigade, to run programs that offered free clean needles. Like the Women's Committee, members of ACT-UP that wanted to work with intravenous drug users had to form separate committees within ACT-UP. Evidentially, any group affected by AIDS that did not represent the "gay identity" of ACT-UP, relied on smaller, autonomous organizations rather than the larger whole for support and consciousness building.<sup>80</sup> Overall, the focus on promoting a "gay identity" and the perceptions of what defined "gay identity" substantially narrowed the social movement.

Like ACT-UP's failure to bring in heterosexuals affected with AIDS, ACT-UP never significantly bridged the barriers between communities of different races because of their focus on the white, male, middle class "gay identity." In early 1990s, ACT-UP attempted to include wider goals of social justice rather than just primary goals of access to treatment for AIDS-related diseases.<sup>81</sup> However, as Ming-Yuen S. Ma stated in my section on political consciousness, racial diverse communities did not relate to ACT-UP's "white, gay, male" identity. Consequently, other autonomous organizations formed, that maintained contact with ACT-UP, but retained a separate identity.<sup>82</sup> Limiting the identity of the movement produced the same affect of limiting oppositional consciousnesses of a movement. ACT-UP used a "gay

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<sup>80</sup> Bruce Lambert, "10 Seized in Demonstration as They Offer New Needles," *New York Times*, March 7, 1990.

<sup>81</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 205-207.

<sup>82</sup> Ming-Yuen S. Ma Interview, 8-9.

identity” to develop collective cohesion, but ultimately alienated potential members in the African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and other disenfranchised groups.<sup>83</sup>

By time ACT-UP attempted to build consciousness and an inclusive identity in racially diverse communities the opening for support of the movement had closed. As Ann Northrop noted, when ACT-UP decided to branch out into racially diverse communities the organization made a relatively small effort to promote inclusiveness. Furthermore, by this time, racially diverse communities already responded to the AIDS crisis by forming their own separate, autonomous organizations with no relationship with ACT-UP. Thus, connections with racially diverse communities never materialized and ACT-UP began lose its cohesion.<sup>84</sup> By focusing on building an identity that included these communities, ACT-UP could have expanded the movement and achieved larger primary objectives. However, the “gay identity,” like the socio-economic identity, resulted in tactics that initially promoted collective action, but resulted in creating a narrow and eventually defunct social movement.

### **The Successes and Failures in the Objectives of ACT-UP**

The objectives of ACT-UP fall into two distinct areas. ACT-UP’s initial objectives focused on initiating government intervention in the AIDS crisis, and providing services for those afflicted with the AIDS crisis. As ACT-UP in countered resistance, it modified its objectives to include challenging and eliminating homophobia in society. Upon its dissolution in 1993, ACT-UP achieved several successes in relation to its first objective, but failed to completely address homophobia in society.

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<sup>83</sup> Reed, *The Art of Protest*, 205-207.

<sup>84</sup> Ann Northrop Interview, 15-18.

By the end of 1993, ACT-UP achieved several successes in securing AIDS related services. By the time of its dissolution, ACT-UP secured services from the government to address the AIDS crisis. For example, because of ACT-UP's movement the government shortened the drug testing and approval process for AIDS related drugs. ACT-UP obtained more government funding for AIDS research, housing and care of AIDS victims, and education of AIDS prevention. ACT-UP proved instrumental in procuring government legislation protecting the rights of people with HIV in society.<sup>85</sup> By 1993, ACT-UP's actions reduced the price of the AIDS treatment drug AZT by over two-hundred percent.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, ACT-UP secured over one-billion in government funding to finance medical research of AIDS.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the primary successes of ACT-UP included securing AIDS related services from the government.

The success of ACT-UP providing a societal alternative to AIDS indifference or neglected rested partly on a reformist agenda. As Habermas explained in his theory of historical potentiality, alternatives to the status quo appear more attractive when theory corresponded to reality.<sup>88</sup> Thus, ACT-UP's "reform politics" appeared far more attractive than a movement focused on deconstructing racism, sexism, or capitalism in society. Furthermore, in a dialectical examination of ACT-UP's social movement, those calling for change, or the anti-thesis, represented members of the original corporate establishment, or thesis. Consequently, the call for change came from the dominant classes with the support of several marginalized groups. The fact that the change came from those within the dominant corporate structure, helped create the alternative, government intervention, more attractive.

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<sup>85</sup> Sawyer, "ACT UP founder "acts up," 92-100.

<sup>86</sup> Cruikshank, "The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement," 175.

<sup>87</sup> "AIDS and Misdirected Rage," *New York Times*, 1.

<sup>88</sup> Ray, Rethinking *critical theory*, 41-43.

Along with ACT-UP's reformist agenda, ACT-UP's tactics of funding and demonstrating led to government concessions. As I have noted in the section on class identity, ACT-UP attracted many members with jobs in the corporate sector of the United States economy. This allowed for one of the largest funded social movements seen in the twenty-first century. With a large amount of resources (posters, flyers, newspapers, etc.) not only could ACT-UP attract more members but they could also effectively lead organizing campaigns in major cities like New York, San Francisco and Chicago.<sup>89</sup> With a large financial support, ACT-UP could afford to involve themselves in direct action against the status quo and inside negotiations with government officials and pharmaceutical companies. By using tactics "inside" and "outside" the socio-economic and political system, ACT UP wielded a considerable amount of power. This power allowed ACT-UP to have a high degree of autonomy within the socio-economic and political system. This power combined with ACT-UP's "reformist" rather than "revolutionary" alternative allowed for more success in ACT-UP's primary objectives.

Though ACT-UP's alternative to government negligence of AIDS appeared successful, ACT-UP's initiatives to end homophobia in society met with resistance that destroyed the movement. As I have noted in the earlier sections on political consciousness and identity, ACT-UP advocated for societal acceptance of homosexuality and an end to discrimination. Though, ACT-UP secured legislation making discrimination of HIV positive individuals in the work place illegal, they had not secured legislation making it illegal to discriminate against homosexuality.<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, in today's society we still experience heterosexism in society and government. Issues like governmental benefits of marriage for homosexual couples and the ban on homosexuals in the military indicate a political, economic and social system privileging for

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<sup>89</sup> Cohen, "All They Needed," 103-106.

<sup>90</sup> Cruikshank, "The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement," 175-177.

heterosexuals.<sup>91</sup> Though ACT-UP advocated for fundamental changes to society's dominant class structure, society did not accept the alternative.

## Conclusion

The limited political consciousness and "identity politics" within ACT-UP limited the potential for change in society. As I have discussed in the previous sections on political consciousness and identity, ACT-UP acted on objectives which related to the "gay community." The split over ACT-UP's tactics of working inside the system versus outside contributed to the dissolution of the movement in 1993. When asked why he felt Treatment and Data split from ACT-UP Larry Kramer respond with:

Because they became drunk on hubris – drunk on their brains, drunk on the very things Maxine predicted, I might add. They were drunk on their power. They could sit down with the head of Bristol-Myers or the chief scientists. They could call all these people up and they could do it on their own from then on, and they didn't need anyone fighting on the outside for them. And perhaps they became a little ashamed of us, I don't know. But I will never forgive them for it."<sup>92</sup>

ACT-UP's use of "gay identity" to generate consciousness of their movement alienated individuals who could have supported the movement but did not identify as gay. Instead of expanding the oppositional consciousness of movement to include solutions to racism, sexism, and classism in United States Society, as Ann Northrop proposed, ACT-UP chose to only advance the concerns of the AIDS infected gay population.<sup>93</sup> As Aldon D. Morris explained in his article, a social movement must expand and develop oppositional consciousness in order to fuel a movement. The movement would not continue to draw support from individuals if the

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<sup>91</sup> Aaron Belkin, "The Pentagon's gay ban is not based on military necessity," *Journal of Homosexuality* 41 (2001), 103-109; Ellen D.B. Riggle, Jerry D. Thomas, and Sharon S. Rostosky, "The Marriage Debate and Minority Stress," *Political Science and Politics* 38 (April 2005), 221-224.

<sup>92</sup> Larry Kramer Interview, 16.

<sup>93</sup> Ann Northrop Interview, 15-18

movement did not expand and develop oppositional consciousness.<sup>94</sup> Since ACT-UP used gay identity to generate consciousness the movement invariably appealed to those who identified with ACT-UP's image. Consequently, individuals who had AIDS but belonged to other social groups felt alienated from the group's image. Thus, by not addressing racism, sexism, and classism in the system, ACT-UP alienated those who did not identify with the disenfranchisement of homosexuals. The lack of support from these communities resulted in ACT-UP's inability to generate an alternative power structure that the present socio-economic and political system recognized as attractive.

The example of ACT-UP served to inspire or anger. ACT-UP challenged the political, economic and social structures that prevented its members gaining services necessary to their health. The movement incited anger from those who viewed the group's tactics as dangerous, militant, and offensive. In the end, ACT-UP's struggle attempted to democratize the power in United States society. ACT-UP's social movement challenged a power structure built on heterosexism. Although, this system of oppression still exists, their successes in AIDS treatment, prevention and education have created a healthier and safer population in the United States. The example of ACT-UP inspired hope in the idea that individuals faced with adversity can come together to accomplish something extraordinary.

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<sup>94</sup> Aldon D. Morris, "Political Consciousness and Collective Action, in *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1992), 369-371.

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