

Analysis:

Has the time come for civil disobedience?

by Jim Duley

The Unitarian-Universalist hall was full with about 100 or so lesbians and gay men who came to hear John D'melio, UNCG Professor of History, speak on the past, present and future of the gay rights movement.

The event, a fundraiser for North Carolina's first Direct Action Group, the North Carolina Lesbian and Gay Liberation Front (also known as the Queerheels), was a truly homosexual one; what other group of people would think to raise money with a combination political speaker/dance party?

The general tone of the lecture was familiar and comforting. Lesbians and gay men, energized from the amazing March on Washington in October, were getting their acts together in a way unseen since the pumps flew and the claws scratched in the Village during the summer of '69.

Cities in North Carolina where gay politics traditionally meant an occasional *signed* letter to the editor (gasp!) have been organizing new groups and strengthening old ones. The list of gay and lesbian organizations which could not-so-long-ago be counted on one person's fingers, now need almost every extremity of a whole gaggle of queers. Cities from Asheville to Wilmington are now the homes of umbrella-type political/educational lesbian and gay organizations, at least seven college groups, a substantial number of AIDS-support and education groups and four MCC's (not to mention how many lesbian potluck groups).

And at the same time, North Carolina and the Western World are witnessing an increase in public demonstration and civil disobedience by members and supporters of the lesbian and gay community(ies).

John D'Emilio spent much of his speech on this issue (rightly so, since it was a benefit for those "rowdies" who staged the Valentine's Day kiss-in at Jesse Helms' Raleigh office and were the talk of the local media). He drew a number of intriguing parallels between the Black Civil Rights movement and the Gay and Lesbian movement to help clarify why CD and public demonstration in general seem to co-occur with a huge blossoming of energy, organizing, and empowerment.

The Black movement spent several decades in an initial phase of development, when organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League were founded. At this time, however, the dominant (i.e. straight and white and male) society was able to pretty much ignore the "Black problem" and go on discriminating as per usual.

After World War II, however, the movement entered a second, more visible stage in its development. No longer could the white majority ignore the people of color and their outrage over their oppression. Lawsuits were filed and often won by blacks and black organizations, most notably *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, which began the dismantling of apartheid, 'Merican Style.

But it was about this time that the Civil Rights movement entered its third and most radically successful stage of development--one that saw successes outnumber failures at an ever increasing number and that paved the way for eventual (although not complete in the 1980s) success of the struggle.

What brought about this quite sudden shift in the movement? Direct Action! People like Rosa Parks refusing to move to the rear of the bus, people like the youths who refused to leave the Greensboro Woolworth's lunch counter, and people like Martin Luther King, Jr. addressing hundreds of thousands of blacks and whites at the March on Washington.

Similarly, John D'Emilio said, the lesbian and gay movement has gone through these stages of development. Before the late 1960s, organizations like the Mattachine Society were established, and although they continued to grow, they were virtually ignored by the straight society. After a time often marked by the 1969 riots in Greenwich Village, the lesbian and gay movement moved into a second stage of steady progress and victory, such as local ordinances in cities like Chapel Hill and San Francisco and even Wisconsin.

But now some members of the lesbian and gay community, who have been "within the system" types since they were baby dykes and faggots (and I am definitely one of them) have come to understand that it is only through direct action that any real change is possible, to both let the general non-gay populace sit up and take notice of us, and also to let them see our strength and power.

The power of direct action became clear to the nation as the largest civil rights demonstration ever to be held in Washington, DC was planned and carried out by queers and their friends. This was a march to show the world that we are here (and have always been here) and that we are strong and united. Strong and united because of (in spite of?) our tremendous diversity as a people.

But, these same "within the system" types who helped make the march so powerful are often a bit skittish when the subject of civil disobedience, an (ohmigod) *illegal action*, comes up. "It'll just feed the fire of homophobia" they say, and in many respects, they are right. Often our actions do provoke the hatred of others. But this is no reason not to fight. Just ask Coretta Scott King about her husband's work. Was it worth it? Can you seriously ask?

Illegal CD is certainly not for everyone, and not to be done lightly. Groups like the Queerheels (which is, by the way, a direct outgrowth of the CD in Washington at the March) recognize that some people cannot afford (socially, economically, emotionally) to break laws to point out injustice. Often, as was the case in Washington, the action pro-

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