

Sexualities

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a source-focused session lasting 50 minutes. The session is aimed at second- or third-year undergraduates. It will fit into modules on histories of activism or sexuality and could be adapted as a stand-alone session on LGBTQ+ history on generalist modern history modules. The separate parts of the activity take up to 45 minutes, allowing the seminar leader time to answer student questions and prepare the ground for the following session.

Context and aim

This seminar activity considers differing interpretations of the New York Stonewall uprising, a moment often seen as the origin of modern LGBTQ+ activism. Students are asked to compare three different accounts of the Stonewall riots, all of which are based on oral histories. Then, the students will compare the portrayal of the Stonewall riots in these sources with the ‘institutional’ history set out in Barack Obama’s 2016 Presidential Proclamation to establish a Stonewall National Monument in New York. The task encourages students to explore how popular memory is created, how oral history interviews can be put to different uses and how these can change our understanding of historical events.

Preparation

Ahead of the seminar, students should be divided into three groups, each of which will be assigned one of the following pieces to read or listen to before the seminar:

- **Group 1:** Podcast: Charlie Bennett, 'New York City', *Tales of Your City*, 10 June 2019, https://prism-tes.simplecast.com/episodes/new-york-city-1Y_0BTEF
- **Group 2:** Eric Marcus, *Making Gay History: The Half-Century Fight for Lesbian and Gay Equal Rights* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), pp. 119–32, 453–8.
- **Group Three:** Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBTQ Rights Uprising that Changed America*, revised edn (New York: Plume, 2019), pp. xxix–xxx, 207–62.

Students may also wish to read one or both of the other pieces to strengthen their understanding, but this is optional.

The podcast episode is taken from a wider series, produced by Netflix and aired during Pride month. The transcript is available here: https://prism-tes.simplecast.com/episodes/new-york-city-1Y_0BTEF/transcript. It includes direct audio recordings from the interview with Sylvia Rivera, introduced by the podcast host and interspersed with reflections and commentary from the original interviewer (Eric Marcus).

The second text is from Marcus's book based on the interview project. Marcus introduces the chapter with a broader historical analysis of the late 1960s, before jumping between several short excerpts from a variety of interviewees (including Rivera), to build up an overall picture of the uprising from different perspectives.

Finally, Duberman's book, the first edition of which was published in 1993, is also based on a wide range of interviews but paraphrases them to create a coherent third-person narrative, rather than quoting directly.

There will also be dedicated time in the session to read Barack Obama's Presidential Proclamation announcing the establishment of the Stonewall National Monument (available here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/24/presidential-proclamation-establishment-stonewall-national-monument>). Some students may wish to read this ahead of time.

Description of activity

Part 1: Introduction [5 minutes]

Place on the board screenshots of, or references to, some of the many pieces of public media about the Stonewall uprising, such as:

- Eric Marcus, 'How Stonewall Became a Symbol of Gay Rights', *New York Post*, 28 June 2009, <https://nypost.com/2009/06/28/how-stonewall-became-a-symbol-of-gay-rights/>
- Film: PBS, 'Stonewall Uprising: The Year that Changed America', 10 June 2023, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/stonewall/>
- Barack Obama, 'Presidential Proclamation: Establishment of the Stonewall National Monument', 24 June 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/24/presidential-proclamation-establishment-stonewall-national-monument>
- Film: Roland Emmerich (dir.), *Stonewall* (2015).

Briefly discuss students' prior knowledge of the Stonewall uprising. If most or all students have previously heard of Stonewall, you could use a tool like Mentimeter to produce a word cloud of the main topics they associate with it, which may include terms like riots, history, gay, trans, etc.

Part 2: Small-group discussion [10 minutes]

The students should sit in small groups according to which piece they were assigned ahead of the seminar. Five minutes will be spent discussing the questions below, and 5 minutes will be dedicated for groups to report back to the rest of the class. This part of the seminar aims at establishing familiarity with the sources, their authors and the motives behind them.

Questions for Group 1:

- Why was this podcast produced?
- What information did you learn about the Stonewall uprising from the podcast?
- What information did you learn about the interviewee?

Questions for Group 2:

- Who is Eric Marcus, and why did he write this book?

- What information did you learn about the Stonewall uprising from the book extracts?
- What information did you learn about the interviewees?

Questions for Group 3:

- Who is Martin Duberman, and why did he write this book?
- What information did you learn about the Stonewall uprising from the book extract?
- What information did you learn about the interviewees?

Part 3: Large-group discussion [5–10 minutes]

This section of the seminar should build on the previous part, after students have shared their contributions to the group's discussion questions with the class. It encourages students to compare the sources, and to reflect on differing uses of oral history interviews and the effects of each approach.

- How does each source use the interview data?
 - What are some advantages and disadvantages of each method?
 - Which do you prefer, and why?
- The interviews were conducted at least ten years after the original Stonewall riots took place. How might this affect the narratives told in each source?
- The interviews for each source were conducted in the 1980s and 1990s, but the sources were published later – 2019 (podcast), 2002 (Marcus) and 1993 (Duberman's first edition), respectively. Do you think the public perception of Stonewall has changed in that time? In what ways?

Part 3: Individual reading [10 minutes]

Each student should read Barack Obama's Presidential Proclamation announcing the establishment of the Stonewall National Monument (available here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/24/presidential-proclamation-establishment-stonewall-national-monument>), approximately 2,500 words. They should highlight key points, focusing in particular on the similarities and differences between the Proclamation and the sources they have analysed previously.

Part 3: Large-group discussion (5–10 minutes)

This part of the seminar aims to draw together the various sources analysed, raising questions about individual and institutional memory and the role of protest.

- What reasons does the Presidential Proclamation give for designating the Stonewall Inn a National Monument?
- How do the oral history sources differ from the Presidential Proclamation? In what ways are they similar?
- The sources describe Stonewall as both a ‘riot’ and an ‘uprising’, and the Proclamation refers to the ‘Stonewall Uprising’. What are the connotations of each term?
 - Which do you prefer, and why?

Part 4: Wrap-up

Tutors can use this time to emphasize ‘take home’ points from the session or to prepare the ground for the next session in the module.