

Week 10 – Reading Guide – The Religious Right and the AIDS Epidemic

Today we begin the fifth unit of the course, “Changing Tides: Gender and Sexuality as Battlegrounds, c. 1980-2000.” This period follows the tumultuous era we covered in unit four, which witnessed a flowering of civil rights, feminist, and LGBT activism, as well as a general expansion of sexual freedom and expression. Many Americans during the 1960s and 1970s stepped outside of imposed boundaries, embraced new sexual and gender identities, and participated in revolutionary movements that sought to radically remake the world.

Not everyone welcomed these movements – or the changes they brought to American life. During the 1980s and 1990s political conservatives and various newly united religious groups fought together to contain the transformations wrought by the previous decades, building a powerful counterrevolution that emphasized gender and sexuality as cultural battlegrounds. In the process, this new conservative coalition reshaped the American political landscape in ways that remain relevant to this day.

What historians now call “the rise of the right” was accompanied by the rise of an unknown and terrifying epidemic that ravaged gay communities during its earliest stages. The HIV/AIDS epidemic fundamentally altered the lives of LGBT Americans and gave rise to new forms of discrimination... and activism. This week, we will discuss these developments and their impacts on sexual and gender identities in the 1980s and 1990s.

Assigned Texts

- Margot Canaday, “The AIDS Crisis on the Job,” in *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023) pp. 187-226.
- Susan Faludi, selections from *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* [1991], in *Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, WWII to the Present*, Schneir, ed. (1994) pp. 454-468.
- Phyllis Schlafly, Interview with *The Washington Star* [1976], in *The Rise of Conservatism in America, 1945-2000: A Brief History with Documents*, Story and Laurie, eds. (2008) 103-107.
- Larry Kramer, “1,112 and Counting,” *New York Native*, Issue 59, March 14-27 (1983) 1-8.
- Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” *M.S.* 2:4 (1992) pp. 39-41.
- ❖ FILM: *How to Survive a Plague* (2012) 110 min.

Questions to Consider

Margot Canaday is an historian of gender and sexuality whose research focuses on the legal and political-economic processes that have shaped queer life in the modern US. The chapter you read this week is from her recent, award-winning book, *Queer Career: Sexuality and Work in Modern America*. Does Canaday’s focus on workplaces change the ways you have thought previously about HIV/AIDS and its history? How about queer activism?

Susan Faludi is a journalist and author of numerous popular books. This week we read an excerpt from her 1991 book, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, which examines the rise of anti-feminism in the 1980s. What role, according to Faludi, did popular media play in fueling backlash? What forms did the backlash take, and how did it portray feminism? Read Rebecca

Walker's call for a feminist "Third Wave" alongside Faludi. Walker's article was written less than a year after publication of *Backlash*, and drew inspiration from the controversial confirmation of Clarence Thomas to the US Supreme Court – despite credible allegations of sexual harassment from his former employee (now Professor of Social Policy, Law, and Women's Studies at Brandeis University) Anita Hill. What do these texts by Walker and Faludi tell us about the politics of sexuality and gender in the 1980s and 1990s?

Phyllis Schlafly was a conservative activist who gained fame for her efforts to prevent ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment in the early 1980s. In this interview she explains her opposition to the ERA. What do you think of her argument? Why might it have been appealing to some American women and men?

Larry Kramer was an author, playwright, and queer public health activist. His 1983 article, "1,112 and Counting" was one of the first published accounts of the AIDS epidemic's impacts on the gay community, and it is widely credited with launching the grassroots movement to combat the disease. How would you describe the tone of this article? What response does he call for?

We will not have time to view the outstanding 2012 documentary, *How to Survive a Plague*, in class. Please make sure to view it before we meet. Try to connect this film to other assigned materials this week. Bring questions and comments related to the film to class.

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