

“Queer Lives and Class Politics, 1978–2011”

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Abstract

New York City has one of the largest and best organized lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) movements in the world. Yet the movement’s considerable legislative and political victories have had uneven benefits, offering only limited gains for the city’s many working class and poor queer people. Understanding this differential impact requires examining today’s LGBTQ movement alongside a concurrent transformation in New York City: the restructuring of the city’s class dynamics and political economy. The past three decades have seen the financialization of the New York City’s industrial base, the growing dominance of business elites in municipal governance, and new forms of welfare austerity and police harassment. “Queer Lives and Class Politics, 1978–2011” explores this apparent paradox between the expansion of formal rights on one hand, and emergence of unprecedented levels of economic inequality. It contributes a theoretical account of social movement dynamics that bridges distinct scholarly literatures on identity and political economy.

This research articulates how the city’s broader political economy, and the class dynamics with and beyond LGBTQ communities, shaped LGBTQ and AIDS activism. This is a multi-method case study with intra-case variation, based on investigating four distinct domains: same-sex marriage equality, HIV and AIDS services, employment protections for LGBTQ people, and policing. Specifically, my objects of analysis are the movement’s organizational forms, strategies, demands, and outcomes. I argue that polarized income dynamics of financialization result in the bifurcation between gay legal equality and persistent queer poverty.