Proposal For Student-Run Course:
Gender in the Twentieth Century United States

The focus of this course will be the history of lesbians and gay men in the twentieth century United States. Throughout the semester we will be looking at historical continuity and change, paying special attention to the different experiences of racial minorities, the influence of psychological theories, the homosexual community's search for allies, and lesbians' and gay men's creation of distinctively gay cultures within the context of the larger society. Topics include:

(1) General Overview of Gay History and Introduction to Course
(2) History as Story-Telling: Writings by Lesbians, Writings about Lesbians
(3) Studying the Invisible: Homosocial Worlds (1850-1914)
(4) The Heterosexual Revolution: World War I to 1938
(5) World War II
(6) The 1950's and McCarthyism
(7) The Homophile Movement: Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis
(8) Radicalization
(9) Stonewall / Sexuality and Sex Roles
(10) The 1970's: Political Gains / Gays as Workers
(11) Feminism and Lesbianism: NOW, Radicalesbians
(12) Gays and Religion: Changing Attitudes, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the Moral Majority
(13) Issues of the 1980's: AIDS, Foster Care, Sodomy Laws, Changing Social Patterns
(14) Conclusions: Putting It In Perspective
Structure:

The class will meet once a week for three hours. For each class we will assign readings usually totalling 100-200 pages. Two facilitators will lead the discussions; each will be responsible for distributing a position paper on the readings at least two days before the class meeting and for preparing pertinent questions to stimulate discussion. At the end of each class each student will fill out a short self-evaluation form. The course will run during the Spring, 1987 semester; Jerome Wood has agreed to be the faculty person associated with the course.

Grading:

The position papers are intended primarily to spark discussion and therefore will not be graded. Grades will be based on two assignments. First, a mid-term paper of at least twenty pages will be due the second week after spring break. Second, each student will interview two gay people and transcribe the interviews by the eleventh week of the semester. These transcripts will be shared among the class and will form the basis, perhaps in addition to library work, of a six to twenty page project report which is due during finals week. One of these papers must focus on history before 1960 and the other on history since 1960; they will count equally towards the grade.

Participation in class discussions is very important. The self-evaluation forms will include questions about class participation and completion of assigned readings; they will be collected after each class and copies placed in a file in McCabe. If a student shows a pattern of not completing assignments and not participating in discussions Professor Wood may lower that student's grade.
The class will also compile an annotated bibliography of sources that will be available to other persons interested in gay history. Every student will be responsible for contributing to this project.

Rationale:

In the last eighty years America has experienced many changes in popular social-sexual patterns and mores: the meaning given to being a man or a woman, the understanding of the nature of sex and gender, and social norms for relationships between the sexes have all undergone significant transformations. At the turn of the century the Victorian ethic greatly influenced how people lived and perceived their world. Men and women had largely separate social lives, the nature and role of each sex was largely constructed in terms of the "separate spheres" idea, and society had a generally repressed attitude towards sexuality. The women's movement culminating in women's suffrage and Freud's work on sexuality were among the influences that led to the "heterosexual revolution" of the 1920's, when women's and men's generally homosocial worlds disintegrated as the ideal of the "companionate marriage" came to the fore. Another important change came with World War Two, when for a brief period of years men and women reverted to interacting primarily with those of the same sex, men in the battlefield and women on the home front. Women were encouraged and found themselves competent to do the many tasks necessary to keep the country going during the war, but when peace came the sex roles of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers were reimposed. Men and women were once again described as fundamentally different, possessing different natures, tastes, and capabilities, and fulfilled by entirely different functions in life. Both men and women came to rebel against
these strict sex roles as limiting to full human life, resulting in the "human potential" movement of the late 1960's and 1970's and the modern feminist movement. We are now seeing a reaction to the changes of the last two decades, as many people extoll the vision of the family that came to be viewed as ideal during and after the Industrial Revolution: the man working outside the home in factory or business and providing protection and material goods for the woman, who gives him emotional sustenance and home comforts and raises his children.

We wish to view these events and trends from the perspective of a group of people that has simultaneously been thoroughly integrated into American society and profoundly alienated from it, especially from its prescriptions concerning sex roles and family relationships. Lesbians and gay men (hereafter referred to as "gays") experience the most important relationships of their lives in a fundamentally different social context than that of most Americans. For much of this century they have had to hide the existence of these relationships, but since World War Two gays have been increasingly vocal in affirming the value and worth of their experiences and feelings. We intend to examine how changing societal attitudes towards sex roles and sexuality have interacted with the changing experience of gay people.

We believe that knowledge of the experience of gay people is crucial for a full understanding of the changes that have occurred in American society during the twentieth century. World War Two and the women's liberation movement that began in the 1960's have both had significant impact on how gays perceive themselves and their world. Moreover, gays have been at the forefront of many social changes,
challenging popular conceptions of what it means to be a woman or a man and forcing a re-evaluation of the significance and purpose of sexuality and sexual relationships. According to the Kinsey report, gays constitute ten percent of the population. They are an influential ten percent because they challenge the fundamental bases on which the other ninety percent live their lives: the challenge that gays pose to conventional concepts of sex roles is directed not only to the intellect, but also to the heart. The virulence of homophobia among some straight people is a reflection of how deeply the existence of gay people can threaten the constructs by which people structure their lives. We do not intend to focus, however, on homophobia or the gay response to homophobia, but on how gay people have lived their lives as multi-faceted human beings. The experience of being gay in a predominantly straight society influences to some degree all aspects of a person's life, and we therefore wish to examine the function and meaning of a person's most intimate experience of the world being fundamentally at odds with society's construction of interpersonal relationships. We also wish to examine how gay people have affected society's constructs of and attitudes towards sex roles and sexuality simply by being, and by progressively more strongly affirming the worth of their being through the gay liberation movement. Since one's experience of oneself as a woman or a man is very important in every person's life, we believe that the study of the historical development of people's understandings of sex roles and sexuality is of critical interest in social history.

Student Organizers: Rasheed Abou-Alsamh, Michael Casper, Hubert Chang, Edward Kamrin, and Michael Reed, Lori Kenschaft '87
Incomplete Syllabus

(1) General Overview of Gay History and Introduction to Course

Short class, no assigned readings.

(2) History as Story-Telling:
Writings By Lesbians, Writings About Lesbians


Radclyffe Hall, Well of Loneliness, 1929.


(3) Studying the Invisible: Homosocial Worlds (1950-1914)


- "Homophobia, Misogyny, and Capital: The Example of Our Mutual Friend" (optional)


Bullough, Vern, "Challenges to Societal Attitudes Towards Homosexuality in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," Social Science Quarterly 1977 58(1):29-44.

(4) The Heterosexual Revolution: World War I to 1933

Rapp, Rayna, and Ross, Ellen, "It Seems We've Stood and Talked This Way Before: Wisdom from the 1920's" Ms April 1983 pp. 54-56.


(5) World War II


(6) The 1950's and McCarthyism


"Homosexuality Issue," Newsweek November 16, 1953, 42:44+. 


(7) The Homophile Movement: Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis

"Retreat to Respectability," pp.75-91.

-- "Lesbians United," pp.219-255.


(8) Radicalization


(9) Stonewall / Sexuality and Sex Roles


(10) The 1970's: Political Gains / Gays as Workers


(11) Feminism and Lesbianism: NOW, Radicalesbians


(12) Gays and Religion: Changing Attitudes, the Metropolitan Community Church, and the Moral Majority


Berzon & Leighton:
McNaught, Brian, "Gay and Catholic," pp.56-64.
Brock, Barrett L., "Judaism in the Gay Community," pp.79-87


(13) Issues of the 1980's: AIDS, Foster Care, Sodomy Laws, Changing Social Patterns


(14) Conclusions: Putting It In Perspective