



BOOK REVIEW

George J. Severs, *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. xiii + 237pp. 6 figures. £65.00 hbk. £21.99 pbk.

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Activism, particularly radical activism, is typically understood as direct, assertive and attention-grabbing. For many, the phrase ‘HIV/AIDS activism’ will conjure up images of the ‘die-ins’, marches and political funerals held in the late twentieth-century United States by organizations like ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), already well-documented in books such as Sarah Schulman’s *Let the Record Show* (2021), Benita Roth’s *The Life and Death of ACT UP/LA* (2017) and Deborah B. Gould’s *Moving Politics* (2009).

HIV/AIDS activism in England in the same period has received far less coverage, with English chapters of ACT UP often dismissed as pale imitations of their American counterparts and histories of the epidemic generally focusing on top-down governmental responses. In *Radical Acts: HIV/AIDS Activism in Late Twentieth-Century England*, George Severs draws on written and broadcast media, organizational materials and oral histories to argue for a more capacious understanding of ‘activism’. He argues not just that militant groups like ACT UP had a greater impact in England than historians have previously allowed, but also that these were not the only – or even the most important – forms of HIV/AIDS activism in the country. By defining activism more broadly, including quieter and more quotidian forms, he builds up a picture of a wider, more diverse and more vibrant spectrum of activist approaches to the fight against the virus.

The book is divided into two parts, reflecting the two main arguments Severs sets out. The first part, ‘Radical’, concentrates on more overt forms of activism, primarily exemplified by the English chapters of ACT UP. Severs argues that these amounted to a movement that was ‘a meaningful part of the constellation of activist responses to the epidemic’ (p. 155). In the book’s first chapter, ‘The streets’, he shows persuasively that although ACT UP had been founded in New York, where chapters emerged in England they were translated – rather than transplanted – into specific local and national contexts which were quite different to those of the States. In particular, English HIV/AIDS activism emerged from, and was shaped by, the campaign against Section 28 in the late 1980s. The existence of the NHS also altered debates around access to treatments in Britain, and the slogan ‘Silence = Death’, which was so effective in the context of the Reagan administration’s refusal to acknowledge the virus, achieved less purchase in England where Thatcher’s government had rolled out a ‘wartime response’ public health campaign. At the same time, English HIV/AIDS activism was also aware of and closely connected to a wider international queer

network. This is a point explored further in the second chapter, 'Crossing borders', expanding the focus from ACT UP to the International AIDS Conferences and the previously understudied area of women's HIV/AIDS activism.

The second part of the book, 'Acts', turns to more 'everyday' contexts to argue that HIV/AIDS activism 'happened everywhere' (p. 156). The book's third chapter, on work, is perhaps its strongest. It explores trade union activism around sick pay and the right to work, before moving on to how activists navigated thorny issues of for-profit work in a political landscape where 'corporate' was often a pejorative term. Finally, the chapter touches on voluntary work and emotional labour – not just feeding and caring for people who were ill, but also the use of practical skills at a time when many workers refused to provide services for HIV-positive people. One moving extract includes an oral history interviewee who discussed his work as a voluntary plumber as a practical outlet for his activism: 'tiling the bathroom of an HIV-positive person was as much an expression of his activism' as his involvement with more 'classic' activist activities (p. 90). As Severs argues, the greater visibility of the more 'militant' approaches he discusses in the first part of the book risks obscuring more understated actions which can also be included in his expansive definition of activism. This point is further illustrated by the book's fourth and fifth chapters, which discuss activism in universities and religious contexts.

A strength of the book is its detailed and careful treatment of case-studies from around England. Although most of the larger HIV/AIDS organizations were based in London, Severs takes seriously the turn to queer histories 'beyond London', and includes in his analysis community organizations in Merseyside, the University of Cambridge's AIDS Working Group and student-led campaigns for safe sex education at the University of Birmingham. For the urban historian, it might have been helpful to read more explanation of why these different local case-studies were chosen (whether they were particularly distinctive, or examples of wider trends), as well as how these different locations shaped the activism that took place there. However, this is a relatively minor point, and it is nevertheless refreshing to read a book that clearly strives to include locations around the country in its analysis.

Overall, *Radical Acts* offers an engaging history of several different facets of an 'HIV/AIDS activist constellation' (p. 161). The book will be particularly useful to historians of sexuality, gender and medicine, but also has much to offer to social and political historians who are interested in rethinking what we mean when we talk about activism. As Severs successfully argues, a more expansive definition can lead to a richer, more inclusive and ultimately more hopeful assessment of the transformative potential of radical acts.

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