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### Materials on Queer Civil Disobedience

**Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993. Sarah Schulman. Macmillan, 2021. xxvii + 736 pp.**

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***Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993.*** Sarah Schulman. Macmillan, 2021. xxvii + 736 pp.

When faced with questions about the history of civil disobedience, most political theorists today turn to the same threefold genealogy, to which besides Henry David Thoreau, civil disobedience's "founding father," the Indian independence movement, the anti-nuclear movement, and the African American civil rights movement are said to rightfully belong. The correspondent pantheon of civil disobedience is constituted by well-known figments of the field's political imagination: political activists and theorists ranging from Mohandas Gandhi and Bertrand Russell to Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. are all said to be part of what has been called since the 1960s a great tradition.

Sarah Schulman's detailed oral history of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) New York offers materials that enable us to enrich such genealogies – and to pluralize, in Erin Pineda's (2022, 31) words, "the intellectual resources that are taken to be the stuff of political theory." In her 2014 essay on the "queer conditions of civil disobedience," Eva von Redecker (2014) called political philosophers and theorists to pay more attention to ACT UP, whose "die-in" campaigns have contributed to enriching the repertoire of activism across the world. To this date, however, no one has picked up the baton.

*Let the Record Show* is, alongside the 2014 documentary film *United in Anger*, one of the outcomes of the ACT UP Oral History Project, founded by Jim Hubbard and Schulman in 2001. Until 2018, Hubbard and Schulman conducted interviews with 188 surviving members of the association, whose transcripts, available online, are the core of *Let the Record Show*. By placing people and their experiences first, the aim of the project and of the book was not, as Schulman points out, to underscore experiences of trauma nor to "look back with nostalgia, but rather to help contemporary and future activists learn from the past so that they can do more effective organizing in the present" (xvii). The stories focus on who activists were before AIDS and how it changed their lives, by trying to understand what made a small group of people "rise to the challenge of history" (xix). *Let the Record Show* is also informed by Schulman's experience as an ACT UP activist between 1987 and 1992 and her "awareness of and research into the histories of earlier movements, to trace their influences" (xix).

New York, as Schulman reminds the reader, is the "mother ship" (xi) of all 148 subsequent chapters of the association around the United States and the world. The book offers a look at the lived experience and activism of those who founded it, by covering the period between 1987 – when ACT UP was created by Larry Kramer after

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3 a lecture at the Gay and Lesbian Center in New York – and 1993, years that “frame  
4 the epicenter of the AIDS cataclysm in New York” (xxvi). Across more than seven  
5 hundred pages, *Let the Record Show* centers and historicizes the political agency of  
6 ACT UP activists as part of an “organizational nexus of a larger culture of resistance  
7 by people with AIDS” (xiii). As a young reporter in the 1980s for the gay male  
8 newspaper *New York Native*, Schulman experienced and wrote about “the nascent  
9 movement of resistance, including early civil disobedience and organizing” in a  
10 moment in which the religious right was gaining electoral momentum and women’s  
11 reproductive rights were increasingly at risk (xiv). With *Let the Record Show*,  
12 Schulman expressly aims to challenge a historiographical approach to this context –  
13 of which Kramer’s influential book *The Normal Heart* is part – that romanticizes and  
14 unduly centers the role of men as well as straight and white individuals in AIDS/HIV-  
15 related activism. It is not another US history of heroism (xxii), Schulman insists,  
16 centered on four-to-six exemplary figures but a history of the difficult, often rancor-  
17 inducing process of coalition-making.

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24 The book is organized by “cohered themes and tropes” (xxvi), covering narratives  
25 concerning the strategies and tactics of the movement, the movement’s discussions  
26 on its targets, the role of art as a form of resistance, and the lived experience of mass  
27 death. For those interested in civil disobedience, Chapter 16, “The Culture and  
28 Subculture of Civil Disobedience,” is a fundamental read – as Schulman underscores,  
29 “the most influential cohering experience in values inside ACT UP that almost  
30 everyone shared was civil disobedience training, and thousands of people  
31 experienced it together” (457).

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36 Reflections on civil disobedience and its practice are constant throughout *Let the*  
37 *Record Show*, however. The book’s introduction, “How Change is Made,” places ACT  
38 UP’s activism in a long history of queer civil disobedience movements by groups such  
39 as the Gay Activists Alliance, the Gay Liberation Front, and the Lavender Hill Mob in  
40 campaigns directed, for example, against the American Psychiatric Association (15).  
41 Chapter 15 details, moreover, the challenge that lawyer activists like Paul O’Dwyer  
42 faced when fighting for treatment for non-nationals: “what type of civil  
43 disobediences people who are non-citizens could get involved in, and what could  
44 they do without jeopardizing their status” (454)? The book also offers a detailed  
45 timeline of ACT UP’s activism, which allows the reader, in Schulman’s words, to  
46 “understand how many different directions of activism were ongoing in the same  
47 moment” (xxvii).

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53 In recent years, Lisa Herzog, Matthew Longo, and Bernardo Zacka have called  
54 political theorists to theorize with a more ethnographic sensibility (Herzog and Zacka  
55 2019; Longo and Zacka 2019). Schulman’s book offers us materials to do precisely  
56 so. As Grace Kryder-Reid (2022) argues, “The exclusion of LGBTQ+ perspectives from  
57 historical narratives is by no means unique to the study of civil disobedience, and is  
58 an unfortunate characteristic of most academic disciplines, but the continuation of  
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3 this phenomenon in civil disobedience scholarship actively harms both the field and  
4 the movement itself by ignoring major pioneers of civil disobedience, as well as  
5 major events and movements that are integral to the development of civil  
6 disobedience as a practice.” But beyond these questions concerning the  
7 development of political theory as a field, shedding light on the history of queer civil  
8 disobedience answers to other imperatives: recovering histories of resistance of the  
9 past and (re)placing them at the center of our political imagination. Schulman’s book  
10 is an invaluable contribution in this direction.  
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