

**Sarah Schulman**, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021. ISBN: 9780374185138 (cloth); ISBN: 9781250849120 (paper); ISBN: 9780374719951 (ebook)

In the late 1980s, the spectacular direct actions of ACT UP New York (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) inspired lesbians, gay men and their allies around the world to “take direct action to end the AIDS crisis”. As a teenager, I was one of those inspired by them and spent a year at the end of the '80s organising and taking action with ACT UP London. At a time of desperation and rage, ACT UP offered hope. In hindsight, I think ACT UP London was mostly a failure, despite some very photogenic protests – in large part because it focused on direct action protests at the expense of the wider set of tactics employed by ACT UP New York. But also, despite widespread prejudice against those living with (or imagined to be at risk of contracting) HIV, the socialised healthcare provided by the National Health Service in the UK meant the terrain of struggle was very different compared with the USA. Indeed, as several participants in Sarah Schulman’s book reflect (p.9-93), one of the significant failures of ACT UP in the USA was not to use the AIDS crisis to campaign for universal, socialised healthcare.

In *Let the Record Show*, Schulman draws on interviews recorded with 188 surviving members of ACT UP New York conducted between 2001 and 2018 for the ACT UP Oral History Project that she ran with Jim Hubbard. At nearly 700 pages, this is an extensive and thorough history. It seeks to explore the experience of being part of ACT UP New York at its peak, as well as to move beyond its most iconic (or notorious) expressions, to remember the breadth of protest, campaigning, and advocacy that the group’s members engaged in. As Schulman (p.xiii) states in her preface:

The story of ACT UP New York is much larger than its legendary Monday-night meetings. It is a political and emotional history of liaisons, associations, relationships,

coalitions, and influences that cumulatively create a crucial reality of successfully transformative struggle under the most dire of circumstances.

ACT UP New York was founded in March 1987 following a well-attended and confrontational lecture by the writer, Larry Kramer, at New York's Lesbian and Gay Center, in which he implored the audience to take action to end the AIDS crisis, confronting them with the possibility that, "In five years, half of you will be dead!". Although the book contains a timeline of ACT UP's campaigning, as an appendix, Schulman approaches ACT UP's history thematically, rather than chronologically, noting that there was so much happening simultaneously that such a chronology would be impossible. As the book's subtitle highlights, this is a *political* history, and Schulman is interested in exploring how social and political change is made. She notes that "all our experiences were shadowed by loss" (p.xxvii), and, in recognition of this, the book is peppered with short remembrances for ACT UP members who died at the time or subsequently. While not all these people died of AIDS-related illnesses, it is important to remember that many of those who participated in ACT UP were HIV+ at a time when there were no effective treatments, and their life expectancy was short.

ACT UP is often remembered for its more spectacular acts of civil disobedience, such as its attempt to "Shut Down Wall Street", the (controversial) "Stop the Church" action at St Patrick's Cathedral, or the storming of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). These actions were daring, often large-scale, and visually appealing in ways that encouraged media coverage. Although, under the influence of experienced journalists within their ranks, like Ann Northrop, ACT UP learned to "Speak through the media, not to the media" (p.25), they were also one of the first activist groups to utilise new video technologies to record and distribute their own account of their actions (p.373-407). The presence of many artists, designers, and marketing professionals within ACT UP led the group to develop a highly

original and arresting visual aesthetic, most often associated with the work of the Gran Fury collective (Crimp with Rolston 1990; Finkelstein 2018). Taken together, the group's daring direct actions, their visual aesthetic, and the very contemporary subcultural style embodied by many of their young(er) activists, all helped to inspire the spread of the ACT UP "brand" around the world. However, the campaigning strategies deployed by ACT UP New York were never about direct action in isolation, and not all their direct actions were intended to confront those blocking the development of effective treatments and care for people with HIV and AIDS (or profiting from the little that was available).

From its inception, ACT UP New York pursued a dual "inside-outside" strategy (p.86-89). Direct action on the streets was frequently used to pressurise the federal Food and Drug Administration, Centres for Disease Control, NIH, and pharmaceutical companies to give people living with HIV access to experimental drugs, and to include their community representatives in the design and oversight of HIV research and clinical trials (Epstein 1996). To formulate their demands and influence key decision-makers, ACT UP activists engaged in an intense process of "citizen science" to understand and keep abreast of the latest developments in biomedical and pharmaceutical research. Although ACT UP did recruit some trained biomedical scientists who were key to their treatment activism, most members of the Treatment and Data Committee were autodidacts. The "inside-outside" strategy worked to an extent, but many of those ACT UP members who ended up as community representatives on governmental and industry committees were white men from very similar class backgrounds as established committee members. This tended to mean that their "successes" in shifting the research agenda and clinical trial protocols also favoured white gay men, at the expense of people of colour and women with HIV. Inevitably, this provoked serious political tensions within ACT UP, up to and including the departure of a dozen key treatment activists to form the Treatment Action Group in 1992. Schulman does not shy away

from exploring these debates in detail, nor does she overlook the fact that personality clashes and social cliques amplified the political differences between the two factions.

Despite the tendency of ACT UP's treatment activism to favour the interests of white gay men, one of the group's biggest successes was its four-year campaign to change the official definition of AIDS, so that more women could access experimental drug trials and welfare benefits (p.227-269). Schulman is scrupulous in ensuring that her history of ACT UP acknowledges and examines in depth the full range of the group's work (and the contributions of women and people of colour) – devoting chapters to its work developing AIDS activism in Puerto Rico (p.35-58), needle exchange programmes (p.281-311), and the formation of Housing Works which provided housing for homeless people with AIDS (p.482-504). In charting this range of work, Schulman takes a swipe at the representation of ACT UP's Stop the Church action in Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals' TV series *Pose* (season 2, episode 1, "Acting UP", 2019), which inserted Black trans characters into that action. Schulman demonstrates that the only trans woman known to have been arrested inside the cathedral was white. Her motivation here is not just to correct the historical record, but to argue that *Pose's* fictional representation serves to both paper over the very real tensions within ACT UP around the politics of race and gender, as well as obscuring the important work that was led by women and people of colour within the group.

Recognising the diversity of different forms of campaigning and community building that ACT UP members engaged in also helps Schulman to tease out the different trajectories that led people to an active involvement in ACT UP. In doing so, she shifts that narrative which understands ACT UP purely as a movement of (white) gay men who were enraged by the decimation of their social world, or already dying and with nothing left to lose. She demonstrates that while many people did fall into these categories, many others had different motivations that led them to ACT UP. Although many ACT UP members had not been politically active previously, Schulman notes that ACT UP drew on a wealth of experience

(built up over decades) from feminist health activism, as well as New York's Jewish and Catholic Lefts. While many participants were motivated by the rage, fear, and despair they experienced as their friends and loved ones died, the oral history extracts also reveal that many others drifted into ACT UP looking for a place to belong. This finding resonates with my own study of anti-apartheid direct action activists in London in the same period (Brown and Yaffe 2017).

Whatever motivated people to join ACT UP, those who stayed involved for any length of time experienced the cumulative loss and trauma of the death of many of their friends, lovers, and comrades. In the early 1990s, ACT UP's actions increasingly expressed this collective grief, through political funerals of their members (p.611-631) and the iconic "Ashes Action" where members spread the ashes of people who had died of AIDS on the White House lawn (p.604-610). In acknowledging that grief and rage drove the development of ACT UP's actions, Schulman resists the temptation to "pretty this up" (p.607), recognising that for many it became unhealthy and unsustainable. In these ways, perhaps, she extends Ann Cvetkovich's (2003: 167) ambition to approach the history of ACT UP as "an archive of the emotions". Towards the end of the book, Schulman quotes a 2014 interview with César Carrasco in which (from his perspective as a mental health clinician) he argues that "the AIDS crisis dug a hole in people's psyches", and, reflecting on the crystal meth "epidemic" that impacted on US gay communities from the 1990s, "people basically stay[ed] in crisis, but in a different crisis" (p.637). While acknowledging the grief and trauma associated with ACT UP, Schulman refuses to claim it as redemptive, even as she argues that the experience of participating in ACT UP's activism provided many with the tools to understand systemic issues that might "otherwise feel overwhelming and unaddressable" (p.638).

This book offers a political history of ACT UP New York, and Schulman is clear from the outset that she is more interested in drawing out lessons for contemporary activists than an exercise in nostalgia. Approaching ACT UP's history with this intent, Schulman

notes that “understanding mistakes does not undo successes” (p.6). ACT UP New York has undoubtedly had a profound influence on subsequent activism, not just in the field of LGBT rights and HIV (Shepard and Hayduk 2002). However, over time, some of its key lessons have been lost to mythologising and nostalgia. Schulman (p.24-33) sets out a number of key lessons about how ACT UP approached and conducted direct actions, how their insider-outsider strategy worked as part of this approach, and their commitment to “simultaneity of action, not consensus”. Interestingly, the articulation of those lessons comes early in the book, not at its conclusion. After over 600 pages, the book largely ends on the experience of trauma (discussed above), without returning to the practical lessons for organising that might be learned from ACT UP. For me, this means that the book ends ambiguously – much is left unresolved. And yet, I am not sure this is a failing. By confronting tensions and disputes within the group, and acknowledging how difficult some of its most high-profile members were to work with, *Let the Record Show* challenges attempts to mythologise ACT UP and its legacies. They were messy. So, perhaps, one of the key lessons Schulman offers, woven through the structure of the book, is that organisations do not have to be perfect and squeaky clean (either by the standards of their time, or today) to remain important and useful in the present.

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