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It's Time to Drop the 'LGBT' From 'LGBTQ'

Jonathan Rauch

10-13 minutes

The case for a new term that describes *all* sexual minorities

Contributing editor at The Atlantic



Katie Martin

Frank Kameny, the last century's [greatest gay-rights activist](#), filed the first-ever Supreme Court petition challenging discrimination against homosexuals. He led some of the first gay-rights demonstrations. He was the first openly gay congressional candidate. He spearheaded the challenge to the psychiatric establishment's categorization of homosexuality as a mental illness. He fought tirelessly against

sodomy laws. He did a lot more than that. But there is one thing he never did—at least to my own recollection and that of associates of his whom I consulted. He did not use the term *LGBTQ*, or any of its variations.

This is partly because he was a creature of his era, born in the 1920s and active in an age when the whole argot was different. But he lived until 2011, well into the age of *LGBTQ*. He had plenty of time to make peace with the term, but his friends say he abjured it. “My recollection is *LGBT* or its derivatives were expressly disliked by Frank,” one of them told me. “He would use *gay* to cover the full range; or *gay and lesbian*.” Another said: “Frank was quite indignant about the alphabet soup. When it started in the '80s with *gay and lesbian*, he correctly predicted that there would be no end of it.”

Kameny especially prized, among his many accomplishments, his slogan “Gay is good!”—a proud claim that homosexuals are heterosexuals’ moral as well as legal equals. He wasn’t excluding anyone by using the word *gay*. He didn’t mean that gay is good but lesbian, bisexual, and transgender are not. He believed he was fighting for the values that define all Americans—the values he had fought for in combat during World War II. Gay rights, to him, meant American rights. *Human* rights.

A generation younger than Kameny, I came of age accustomed to the phrase *gay and lesbian*. Later, when *LGBT* arrived, it seemed cumbersome and artificial, but its inclusive aspirations struck me as honorable. So I learned to live with it. In the past couple of years, however, I have come to believe,

at long last, that Kameny was right. The alphabet-soup designation for sexual minorities has become a synecdoche for [the excesses of identity politics](#)—excesses that have helped empower the likes of Donald Trump. It's time to retire the term and find a replacement. I propose a single letter: *Q*.

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Like a lot of historical wrong turns, *LGBTQ* means well. As gay people fought the stereotype of brokenness, *homosexual* came to be seen as clinical and pathologizing. *Gay*, by contrast, had a long linguistic history and no pseudoscientific baggage. In Kameny's heyday and my youth, that seemed just fine. But the male and female homosexual populations differed in some ways, and so *gay* became gendered to complement *lesbian*. By the early 1990s, when some of us founded a group for homosexual journalists, we didn't think twice about calling it the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association.

Meanwhile, as recognition grew that trans people faced discrimination and ignorance comparable to what homosexuals endured, the addition of *T* made gradual inroads. By 2007, when gay-rights advocates decided to make their support for a federal antidiscrimination bill conditional on the inclusion of protections for transgender people, it was clear that the gay-and-lesbian and trans movements had become politically joined at the hip; including the *T* made undeniable sense. Bisexual people, concerned that their issues would be overlooked, also sought acknowledgment, and their initial was stapled in too.

And so the unwieldy four-letter acronym reigned. It had its advantages. It signaled factional inclusion to those inside the

movement, and factional solidarity to those outside the movement. In that sense, it was good politics and good symbolism. But it wasn't stable. Factionalism rarely is. As activists and theorists sought to cover every base, they recognized asexuality and intersexuality and various other identities by coining *LGBTQIAA+*, *LGBTTIQQ2SA*, and other telescoping designations. Lately *LGBTQ* seems to have become the norm, on the assumption that *Q*, for *queer*, can stand in for all the rest.

To some extent, the very artificiality and awkwardness of the acronymic acrobatics speak to their ecumenical aspirations. Unlike designations popularized by oppressors (*Negro*, *Oriental*) or based on national or ethnic particularism (*Italian*, *Jew*, *wasp*), *LGBTQ* is pointedly coalitional and inclusive, and we chose it ourselves. In that respect, its intended message is admirable. But it carries an unintended message as well: an embrace of the identity politics and group separatism that have soured millions of Americans on progressivism and egalitarianism.

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Once activists started listing identities and groups, they realized that anyone not specifically included might feel specifically excluded. Their solution has been to keep expanding the list. But no matter how many letters are added, one group is still pointedly excluded: the cisgender heterosexuals who make up the vast majority of the U.S. population. Not surprisingly, many members of that group resent civil-rights claims that are presented as a succession of carve-outs for minorities, to the benefit of everyone except themselves. Imagine if the religious-liberty movement instead

styled itself the CJMHBSBA+ (Catholic-Jewish-Muslim-Hindu-Buddhist-Sikh-Baha'i-Animist-plus) movement. The symbolism ceases to be about equality for all Americans and becomes instead about naming particularistic claimants. And the very act of asking ordinary Americans to drag themselves through a list of initials is redolent of special rights, not equal rights.

For me, the ugliness and unwieldiness of *LGBTQ* add insult to injury. As does the fact that it is not a label that accurately describes me or any other American. It describes a coalition, yes, but not any actual person. Even as it seeks to explicitly include groups, the concatenation of initials implicitly blots out individuals.

In his 2017 book, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics*, Mark Lilla, a humanities professor at Columbia, [makes a powerful case](#) for returning to an earlier, more broadly inclusive vision of citizenship and civil rights. “Identity liberalism banished the word *we* to the outer reaches of respectable political discourse,” he writes. Lost was the vision of civil-rights leaders, like Kameny and Martin Luther King Jr., who always insisted that they were fighting for the equality, and the benefit, of all Americans. In Kameny’s 1961 Supreme Court petition (challenging the federal government’s ban on the employment of homosexuals), he built his argument on the Declaration of Independence’s promise that the pursuit of happiness is an unalienable right. He insisted that “our government exists to protect and assist all of its citizens,” and he rested his claim on “the interest of the public at large and of the nation as a whole.” By contrast, writes Lilla, “in movement politics, the forces are all centrifugal, encouraging splits into smaller and smaller factions obsessed with single issues and

practicing rituals of ideological one-upmanship.” It is hard to think of a clearer instance of that sort of balkanization than a string of initials like *LGBTQ*, much less an absurdity like *LGBTQIAA+*.

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None of this would matter much if today were, say, 2015, when identity politics seemed like a low-cost enterprise. Now, however, we see its price. So long as the libertarian right and the progressive left fail to speak to the country’s yearning for a transcendent identity, and majorities feel they are being ignored or disfavored, someone is bound to fill the resulting political vacuum. Political analysts and researchers find that [resentment of political correctness](#) and identitarian excess [drove a lot of voters](#), including a lot of nonbigoted voters, toward Trump’s toxic version of national identity. When Steve Bannon, one of the Trump movement’s leading strategists, said, “If the left is focused on race and identity, and we go with economic nationalism, we can crush the Democrats,” he knew what he was talking about.

No, I am not blaming Trump’s presidency on *LGBTQ* (or even *LGBTQIAA+*). Trump himself uses *LGBTQ*. But the term has become symptomatic of the parochialism that is alienating white, straight, male America from the claims of the civil-rights movement. Every time lesbian and/or gay and/or bisexual and/or transgender and/or QIAA+ activists demand the recitation of a string of initials, they implicitly tell a story about seeking equality and betterment for groups, not for individuals, and not for that other set of initials, *U.S.A.*

In short, if there ever was a time when sexual minorities were

served by reminding the world of their factionalism, that time is past. Kameny's preference for a single, simple, overarching designation was well founded. It deserves to be rediscovered.

Today, however, that designation can no longer be *gay*, which, apart from being gendered, won't do for transgender people. *Queer* is inclusive, but its radical baggage and derogatory undertones have precluded its mainstream acceptance. And so, herewith, my modest proposal: *Q*.

If you like, you can think of it as short for *queer*. Or, if you don't like, just *Q*. Give it any etymology you wish. Regardless, the term would be understood to encompass sexual minorities of all stripes. When we speak of ourselves as individuals, we would use *gay* or *lesbian* or *transgender* or whatever applies. When we need a blanket term, we would simply call ourselves *Q*. As in: *the Q population* and *Q equality*. *Q* is simple and inclusive, and carries minimal baggage. When we speak of *Q* equality, we are saying that discrimination against sexual minorities—or for that matter sexual majorities—is not the American way.

In that respect, although I am not LGBTQ, I am certainly *Q*. I think Frank Kameny might have been, too.

This article appears in the January/February 2019 print edition with the headline "Don't Call Me LGBTQ."

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[Jonathan Rauch](#) is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic* and *National Journal* and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.