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16 décembre 2003

Communitarianism and the city : the Marais, a 'gay ghetto' in Paris ?

[compte-rendu en français](#)

Many people gathered in the Café de Flore in Paris to discuss a topic that is often overlooked and considered as taboo in France : communitarianism. This topic is growing in interest in the eyes of researchers, as shown by the number of PhDs on the Marais in Paris or on other gay areas in Lyon and Marseilles. **Communitarianism raises the question of the modern city and its forms of segregation.** The *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie [Dictionary of Homophobia]* (Louis-Georges Tin (ed), 2003, Paris : PUF) has urged Gilles Fumey to organise a *Geography Café* on such a theme.

Michael SIBALIS, a Canadian historian who wrote the entry on '*ghetto*' in the *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie* first reminds us the importance of the fact that this Geography Café takes place in the first floor of the Café de Flore, an historical site known as the 'Room of Minions' in the 1950-60s ! It was one of the most popular Parisian homosexual meeting places after the Second World War. Originally, the *ghetto* was a place set aside for Jews in the Middle Ages, but disappeared during the revolutionary era. The sociologists of the Chicago School began using this term to refer to places inhabited by minority groups. Since the end of the Second World War, the word has also been used to refer to homosexual districts, such as in San Francisco and New York. Even gay people use the word when talking about their area. In France, the Marais is called '*the ghetto*', even if it is not the first one. In the 1880s, Parisian homosexuals preferred Montmartre and Pigalle ; after the Second World War it was Saint-Germain-des-Pres, and by the end of the 1960s Rue Sainte-Anne. The Marais became a gay district thanks to the increase in number of bars, which were protected places in which gay people felt safe and unexposed. The first gay pub opened in December 1978, Rue du Platre (4th Arrondissement of Paris). Nowadays, many gay pubs are concentrated in the Marais and many homosexuals live there ; yet the Marais is rather a commercial ghetto. This district has been famous in Paris since the beginning of the twentieth century, but the 1962 law (called the Malraux Bill) led to a gentrification of the area.

A 1980 report for the Paris City Council presented the Marais as an up and coming middle-class district. Nobody realised that gay people were becoming attracted to this area. Why was the Marais rising in popularity with the homosexuals ? The main reason was its commercial opportunities. In the 1980s, the area was redeveloped as many commercial buildings could be bought for bargain prices. Gay people were looking for pubs opened to public gaze, where they were visible. This would make homosexual life more accepted in the city and in everyday life. The French phenomenon was the exact opposite of the state of affairs in America, where gay people first settled in certain districts and then opened business and pubs. In Paris, the concentration of homosexual population was less prominent in urban space.

Philippe MANGEOT, the former president of *Act Up Paris* and editor of the periodical *Vacarme [Din]* recalls that the word 'ghetto' has not to be taken too literally. It was used as a homosexual tactic to claim this word for the homosexual community, thus suppressing the violence of the word and preventing [homophobic] people from using it as an insult. The word '*ghetto*' is even ironical since it recalls the existence of places considered safe from a homosexual point of view. The word appeared with the development of openly gay areas, but here lies a paradox : gay people have been criticised for being communitarianism supporters only since they visibly appeared as a group. In fact, fifteen years ago, nobody spoke of communitarianism -whether homosexual or Muslim.

This concept appeared at the same time of political correctness. Nobody claims to be a communitarianism supporter and fingers are always pointed at the other. The concept appeared in 1989, the very year of the fall of the Berlin Wall, of the first Muslim headscarf affair and of the change of the French preconceptions of the US. The US, which in the past had been so well praised, began to be seen as divided in ghettos (African-American, Chinese, Italian, homosexual ghettos), far from the idea of a one and indivisible France. Any communitarianism is thus transformed to a threat for republican integration. Nowadays the debate on communitarianism focuses on Muslim population. **This shift clearly coincided with the PACS legislation** [civil solidarity pact, a contract binding heterosexual or homosexual cohabiting couples] in 1999, which gave equal rights to all, whether homosexual or heterosexual. The universal value is not community but republican equality. Communities need however to be defended because of republican universalism : solidarity structures help to institute equality, and that limits communitarianism.

Louis-Georges TIN, a literary scholar, actually wonders why he is here tonight ! According to him, thoughts on universalism are very peculiar to France. In social discourse, the word universalism is only used by French elites. In fact, universalism is based on very local and contingent ground : elites generalise to the other models that they consider as valuable. Isn't there potential tyranny ? Heterosexuality would be universal, and homosexuality not. This argument is flawed. The use of the notion of universalism concerning the homosexual question is very paradoxical : it consists of attacking the communitarianism to claim universalism for oneself. Actually, there is neither universalism nor communitarianism.

Only three communities are considered as 'natural' : labor, family and country, which are all defined together as a social environment. These communities, albeit visible, are overlooked. Any gay person grows within a heterosexual family. His/her personal development is based on opposition, against a structure discrediting his/her way of functioning. Therefore, s/he needs an adoptive family ; the ghetto is his/her chosen family : its function is of integration and identity construction.

Emmanuel REDOUTEY, town planner at the Parisian Institute of Urbanism (Paris XII), whose MPhil thesis on the geography of male homosexuality in Paris was partly published in the periodical *Urbanisme* (July 2002) specifies that several homosexual spatialities have to be taken into account in big cities. One is based on business and socialisation ; another is sexual ; while many others exist if we consider the variety of individual ways of living. These spatialities do not necessarily overlap one another and they work at different levels of visibility. The word 'ghetto' is used for polemical purposes.

In France, it refers both to the idea of gay districts and to suburbs that would be under threat of 'ghettoisation'. In any case, it especially works as a spatial and discursive category feeding

the repulsive and frightening vision of a city abandoned to communitarianism. The symbolical meaning (of the enclave and of the alleged entrenchment of a community) is questionable, however, when the metaphor comes to refer to a social and territorial reality, which, in the case of the Marais, has not been statistically confirmed. Among homosexuals, the 'ghetto' does not strictly refer to a district since the word is used more broadly for the way of life of individuals who live only among exclusively homosexual networks, whether social or even professional. Michael Pollak's article on "L'Homosexualité masculine : le bonheur dans le ghetto." ['Male homosexuality or happiness in the ghetto'] published in 1982 portrays this point more clearly.

These semantic uncertainties hide a geography that is more reticular than polarised by a strong place of public appearance. The Marais plays a particular role : showing, making visible and drawing attention, gaze and discourses, whilst hiding in the process many aspects of homosexual life and encounters organised in most Parisian areas (as confirmed by the spatial repartition of specialised pubs and places of homosexual flirtation). The geography of male homosexuality is constructed on a cone of visibility : the Marais, its business and rainbow flags are visible. The rest of the Parisian territory is however full of other places that are practiced and lived by homosexuals and that were born from a spatial subculture made of discretion and attempts to avoid social control. Yet, the 'gay district' plays an important role as a space of - transient and provisional - identification in the personal life histories of homosexuals. If it represents only particular aspects of gay culture, its function is rather to integrate than to separate.

According to **Bruno PROTH**, an ethnologist, gay people see the Marais as a safe place. That is not always the case, however, since even a gay person can feel uncomfortable or see him/herself as an intruder. Just as there is a code of overrepresentation of the self in the Marais (with these bodies shown as perfect), there is a code of places of flirtation to meet a partner. For heterosexual men, accessing female bodies is difficult because of social codes, prostitution being an exception. For homosexuals, codes to access the other's body do exist but they make it easier : a gesture, a glance, being parked here and not there signal an offer of oneself to the other. In the Marais a gay person can feel at home, which is problematic for the normative heterosexual world (thus strengthening a hidden homosexuality that is less fearful for heterosexuals because it is less visible).

Baptiste COULMONT, a sociologist who presented a PhD thesis in 2003 on same-sex unions within some mainline Protestant churches in the U.S (*Que Dieu vous benisse [May the Lord bless you]* <http://coulmont.free.fr/index.php>) prefers a more spatially differentiated analysis. In the US, especially in New York, Episcopalian churches and more broadly 'liberal' protestant churches call on gay people everywhere, not only in gay districts such as Chelsea or Village. The spatial repartition of gay couples in NY shows that they are even in Upper West Side not normally considered a gay district. In Chicago, the spatial distribution is more uneven : they are concentrated in the North, on the lakeshore, in middle-class white areas (or yet to become so). Many churches try to welcome gay people, a practice which is completely alien to French churches.

Discussion

Many, many questions, especially on geographical practices, explain that this Geography Café ended after 10 pm.

Why do some gay people refuse to live in the Marais ?

For Philippe Mangeot, sometimes people just don't want to be there, and besides defining the Marais as a gay area is a fiction. There are different gay areas and people know what they can find there. A young gay looks for a place to meet other gays. In the 1980s, **Paris Match** presented an article - in a deeply shocked way - on gay people in Paris, an article that turned out to be a mine of information to find gay areas, which even some gay people were ignorant of. Tabloids can sometimes be useful ! Another detail highlights the transient geography of gay life along a pattern of place invention. *Paris Match* also proposed a slogan for Paris subway : 'Prefer the second carriage', as a way of decreasing the number of people in the often overcrowded first carriages. Yet, it turned out that the second carriage became a place to meet other gays. At the beginning of the 1990s, Act Up wondered what to do in overtly homophobic places : either institute violent actions, or make them gay areas by having systematic homosexual meetings, as a way of re-appropriating these places. The Marais was born, because of the refusal to hide homosexuality and lead a double life. Yet, this spatialisation of gay culture is not without problems : homosexual life remains between young people. 'Old' homosexuals, who previously organised private parties or public meetings where old and young could meet, are now excluded from this new practice of urban space.

Michel Sivignon, who lives in the Marais, mentions that few streets have a high density of homosexual culture, while others have a lower one. Homosexual people have claimed the right to become more recognised in the city. What about the economic dimension of the process ? Homosexual ghettoisation tends to be a ghettoisation of rich people as is shown by the rise of the property market in the Marais.

There are communities who contribute to the rise of the property market, whilst others contribute to its decline (*cf.* Black areas in the US). Yet, maps of spatial repartition of gay people cannot be drawn up in France, since data cannot be disclosed - due to a CNIL (Data Protection Agency) requirement. When a possible cartography of Jews or PACS holders was evoked a few years ago, it was immediately refused in France.

Emmanuel Redoutey takes the example of the Parisian City Council policy for the evolution of the social composition in the different districts of Paris. The Rue Montorgueil was transformed into a pedestrian space through a gentrification policy aimed at removing wholesale business from the area. Gay population settled there and it led to a rehabilitation of the area. They are appreciated because they have no children and spend a lot of money. Sometimes estate agents contribute to the development of new gay areas by the attraction of specific business. On the contrary, homosexual people see clearly where the homosexual ghettos are. The Rue Oberkampf for instance, seen as a heterosexual Marais, is called 'Heteroland' !

What urban and housing market strategies are adopted ?

In the US, the most 'successful' cities are those where many gay people live : City councils do everything to attract them. The creation of gay ghettos is always a gentrification story : prices are low, gay people invest, and prices increase. There is a 'pink economy' : gay people spend a lot without asking for the price before. Yet, within the gay community, the Marais is criticised for showing a false image of homosexuals. Can we deduce that gay people are richer, because they have more lucrative professions or a higher intellect ?! Firstly, they have no children, so they have different spending patterns to those who do. Secondly, the gay culture is elaborated

by the richest of homosexuals. The Marais is just gay culture's shop window. The part has not to be taken for the whole.

Do some heterosexual people move when their neighbourhood becomes gay ?

It is difficult to say, since gay studies focus on homosexuals and are driven by homosexuals (the interest in the subject is a form of militancy). Studies on only heterosexuals are quite rare. We don't see heterosexual having to 'come out', claiming their heterosexuality ! There is a heterosexual culture, but it is invisible for heterosexual people because it is historically rooted and conveyed by the majority of people.

What about female homosexuality and lesbians ?

There are specific areas in New York for lesbians. They are concentrated in the North-East of the US (Vermont, Massachusetts), but they are less visible. In France, no data is released by the CNIL's requirements. In her book *Passage de l'Odéon*, Laure Murat raises the question of the invisibility of lesbians in space. For instance, there are naturist gay beaches (known through specialised newspapers or through rumour), but none for women. Men and women don't have the same territoriality ; women seem less attached to territories [*sic*] !

To conclude, **the Marais is a place of leisure and socialisation for gay people**, far from communautarianism. In Paris, those who have a PACS are mainly homosexual, which is not the case in the provinces. Now, Parisians PACS holders are more numerous in the 11th and 18th arrondissements than in the Marais. Gay people are over-represented in Paris region (Ile de France) thanks to the anonymous character of the great city and to the increased possibility of encounters of other homosexual people. The geography of gay people in Paris is organised around concentric circles : in the middle, the Halles, the Marais and Bastille, followed by Gare de l'Est and the 11th arrondissement, then finally the suburbs. The left bank has a lower population of gay people.

Review by *Alexandra Monot* (Agrégation diploma in Geography)

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Book Review : TIN Louis-Georges (ed) (2003), *Dictionnaire de l'homophobie [Dictionary of Homophobia]*, Paris : PUF, 450 pages.

It was not self-evident that a university scholar, Louis-Georges Tin (Strasbourg), could gather 76 authors from various fields to do a critical work not on homosexuality but on homophobic feelings. This militant aspect aims to show gay people facing homophobia and especially non-gay people what homosexuals experience in a hetero-normed society. Not only is the bet taken up, but the dictionary also turns out to be a brilliant tool of work thanks to its intellectual and editorial qualities.

The book starts with a frightening 'anthology' of homophobic statements due to politicians, writers, religious people, psychoanalysts and so on. These statements prove the need to criticise apparently banal words such as 'comic strip', 'caricature', 'difference', 'rhetoric', 'universalism', to name but a few of the hundred entries of the dictionary. Psychologists, historians, journalists, philosophers, a rich variety of researchers in human sciences have tackled this deconstruction of homophobic statements. 25% of the authors are from abroad, giving this work an international dimension. Geographers can appreciate entries such as 'ghetto' or 'communautarianism' where their works are sometimes mentioned, but they can also appreciate the entries by regions and countries around the world, where homophobic practices are scrutinised. Every society generates its own poison and homophobia is not enacted in the same ways in South Africa, South-East Asia or North America. Thanks to its editorial care, the dictionary offers very detailed bibliographies for each entry, making the book a useful companion to the researcher. It is hard to mention here the rare scientific and editorial quality of this book which makes an inventory of all the terms that those who claim to be their victims consider as alienating or degrading. Having read such a dictionary, the reader is surprised by the violence of our societies, which claim to be tolerant but whose minorities have always had bad press. That is why this book is eminently political.

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