

The Price of Tolerance

About: Sylvie Tissot, *Gayfriendly. Acceptation et contrôle de l'homosexualité à Paris et à New York*

By Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer

In her analysis of the way the heterosexual residents of gentrified gay neighbourhoods perceive homosexuality, the sociologist Sylvie Tissot reveals logics of domination dressed up as progressivism.

Gayfriendliness as a Tool of Social Distinction

The relationship the dominant have with homosexuality changes over time and varies according to place. In a certain number of countries, homosexuality currently enjoys legal and public recognition, acquired after harsh struggles. Despite this progress, the historical hierarchy of sexualities remains. According to Sylvie Tissot, it is ironically through a proclamation of acceptance that urban heterosexuals belonging to the upper classes now maintain the symbolic boundaries between them and others, including gays and lesbians. According to them, homophobia is largely an essential characteristic of groups deemed backward, vulgar and dangerous: the poor, racialised people, and some foreigners. Being gayfriendly is now a good practice in privileged milieus, and allows people in this group to consider themselves morally superior. But as the author shows, the fact that this new criterion of distinction benefits gays and lesbians, at least indirectly, is only a fortunate side effect. Although it is expressed as generous open-mindedness, those who support gayfriendly discourse do so because it is to their advantage.

Sylvie Tissot looks at heterosexual residents of the Marais and Park Slope, neighbourhoods in Paris and New York that were partially gentrified by gays and lesbians at the end of the 20th century in a process Colin Giraud calls 'gaytrification'.¹ These

¹ Colin Giraud, *Quartiers gays*, Puf, 2014.

heterosexuals seek ‘diversity’, a depoliticising euphemism that gives these ‘gayborhoods’² a certain bohemian charm. However, living among gays and lesbians comes with its own risks: the fear of being sullied persists. Her interviewees, questioned during ethnographic fieldwork conducted in both cities, appreciate a gay presence when it remains circumscribed and is mainly displayed in respectable, non-demanding forms. The establishments that welcome a gay and lesbian clientele are seen as an added value for the neighbourhood, as long as they remain in the minority, open to straight people and free from sexuality. Although tolerance of homosexuality has become the norm, the old stigma is never far off. Gaston, a sixty-five-year-old retired senior manager, is head of the association *Vivre le Marais*. He is a good illustration of this stance when he speaks of a gay bar against which his association is fighting: ‘[...] what we’re against is everything that’s dirty.’ Indeed, as the book shows, for these *gayfriendly* heterosexuals, ‘[...] even acceptable homosexuality is always a de facto potential source of ‘dirtiness’.

A Heteronormative Rampart Against the ‘Homophobes’

Descriptions in the book of the performance of gayfriendliness reveal that this new element of *habitus* is a generational issue. The elders are the most reticent, sometimes nostalgic for a time when gays and lesbians curbed their visibility. Without necessarily rejecting them, many prefer ‘discreet’ neighbours, who maintain a bourgeois separation between private and public life. The men and women who grew up in the wake of gay liberation see themselves as allies, at least in word, if not in deed. Finally, the youngest say they are indifferent to homosexuality, deploring the supposedly reactionary attitudes of the lower classes. Across these generations, all see homophobes as necessarily elsewhere, in rarely visited but often mentioned places, in ‘the suburbs’, in the provinces, or the ‘Deep South’. While these new attitudes tend towards greater openness, the author warns us that equality, a discourse proclaimed with great enthusiasm, is thwarted by a heteronormativity that is never truly questioned.

Gayfriendliness also appears in gendered forms. It functions in a manner comparable to housework, with women and mothers taking most of the responsibility. For example, they ensure their children are socialised towards gayfriendliness by choosing their friends to include at least one with two mothers. They make sure the children see their uncle’s husband as an ordinary member of the family. Conforming to bourgeois values, these mothers emphasize the value of gay and lesbian couples and same-sex parents, stripping homosexuality of its radical and sexual dimensions. Getting to know gays and lesbians is part of basic cultural capital, like knowing a foreign language. It allows people to assert their class ‘privilege’ while

² Amin Ghaziani, *There Goes the Gayborhood?*, vol. 63, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015.

maintaining a fluid interaction with others who are different.³ Men, for their part, are ‘more prudent’ as the potential for stigma is stronger, particularly when it comes to male homosexuality. They clearly express their gayfriendliness but must never endanger their heterosexuality. While homophobic insults have not disappeared as a marker of virility, the gayfriendliness of their milieu discredits its usage. It is hence best to maintain a physical distance from gays, while preaching an abstract discourse of equality.

This gayfriendliness thus serves to reinforce gender and sexual hierarchies. To start with, as women and men do not practice it in the same way, gayfriendliness crystallises the gender roles within heterosexual couples, thus reinforcing male domination. Next, it allows people to display a pronounced heterosexual identity, while drawing from a suitable class repertoire that maintains heteronormativity. Most people call themselves gayfriendly to better say they are heterosexuals, and prepare their children to follow their example.

The National Frontiers of a Globalised Discourse

The book draws from transatlantic empirical material but does not fall within the comparative sociology tradition. Sylvie Tissot is mainly interested in gayfriendliness as a phenomenon that solidifies the class position of gentrifiers. She highlights the similarities rather than the differences between the two cases. These common points echo a similar phenomenon: a gay, homonormal, globalised culture.⁴ This culture, represented by Madonna’s music, the rainbow flag, *Gay Pride* celebrations, the term ‘*coming out*’ or the demand for the recognition of gay marriage, has spread across national borders, often transmitted by well-off White gay men. Gayfriendliness is a heterosexual counterpoint to this international circulation, and, in the same way, it takes specific forms depending on national contexts.

Sylvie Tissot tells us: ‘There isn’t ‘a’ French gayfriendliness and ‘an’ American *gayfriendliness*’. The book clearly shows its varieties depending on age, gender, parental status, individual romantic trajectories, and other criteria. Drawing on Wilfried Rault, Sylvie Tissot states that gayfriendliness is located on a continuum.⁵ However, it also becomes obvious in the book that the ways people enact their gayfriendliness and learn its codes follow specific logics that vary systematically according to country. The author mentions the differences between her two cases, but a comparativist would likely find that they are not really exploited to explain the phenomenon, and this can be frustrating. The aim of the book is not

³ Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010.

⁴ William L. Leap and Tom Boellstorff, *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language*, Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press, 2004.

⁵ Wilfried Rault, ‘Les Attitudes ‘gayfriendly’ En France : Entre Appartenances Sociales, Trajectoires Familiales et Biographies Sexuelles’, *Actes de La Recherche En Sciences Sociales*, no. 3, 2016, 38–65.

comparison, and I do not criticise Sylvie Tissot for having insufficiently mobilised an analytical framework that she does not claim to apply. However, the reader is left with several unanswered questions at the end of the book.

To start with, I will summarise the national differences in gayfriendliness, which is institutionalised differently in the two countries. In the United States, people learn gayfriendliness throughout their education, from elementary school up to university. It is reinforced by places of worship where tolerance is advocated. The media show families with same-sex parents. The political field has no end of elected representatives proud to defend their rights, particularly the rights of couples. American heterosexuals have expectations of gays and lesbians. They have to accept the moral regime of honesty, come out, be visible and correspond to the positive clichés of self-love. Unsurprisingly, American respondents define themselves more easily as gayfriendly than the French respondents. This is probably related to the Anglophone origin of the word. We can thus ask to what extent there is an American cultural imperialism at work in the spread of this gayfriendly norm, and question the cultural limits of its diffusion. In France, schools, universities and places of worship do not play a key role in gayfriendly socialisation. Gay and lesbian people are certainly present, but they do not occupy an institutionalised position. While the media and political parties provide some visibility for gay issues, they are not a key focus. Gay and lesbian are expected not to emphasise an identity or claim membership of a community. Expressions of support for sexual liberalism are preferred. Readers will also notice greater reticence towards same-sex parents in France. Claiming to be indifferent to people's sexuality is the main French mode of gayfriendliness .

These differences are responses to political rationales, cultural repertoires and social structures, identified in numerous comparisons between France and the United States: 1) trajectories of struggles against racism and sexism; 2) geographic characteristics along racial, sexual and economic lines; 3) anti-communitarianism and republican universalism in France and the rigidification of social categories in the United States; 4) the investment of the State and people's mentalities in the birth rate in France, or in marriage in the United States. These differences explain certain reasons for the national variations in gayfriendliness, but also raise questions of a methodological nature that have theoretical implications.

The Impossible Choice of Neighbourhoods to Study

What are the possible biases induced by comparing the Marais and Park Slope? The demographic details, including those related to the Marais that are taken from Colin Giraud's research on this neighbourhood, show the similarities between the two cases. But differences, which are not without significance for an understanding of gayfriendliness, remain. The Marais is a central neighbourhood and has the reputation of attracting gay men to bars and

clubs. It is the only neighbourhood with national notoriety. If one wants to study heterosexuals in a gay neighbourhood in France, there is not much of a choice. In the United States however, the choice is far more complex: The Castro in San Francisco; West Hollywood in Los Angeles; Boystown in Chicago; Mount Vernon in Baltimore; Midtown or Decatur in Atlanta; Chelsea, or Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan; Park Slope in Brooklyn, etc. There are almost as many neighbourhoods as there are major cities, each with a racial, economic and sexual specificity. Park Slope is a neighbourhood known for its visible population of lesbian mothers and couples.

The challenge is not only methodological. The small galaxy of American neighbourhoods and the solitary status of the Marais in France reflect a profound sociological reality of the organization of sexuality. The practice and ideological content of gayfriendliness is developed in dialogue with the history of homosexuality, as well as at specific sites. This raises questions. How would our vision of gayfriendliness change if we had been able to discover, for example, the perspective of the residents Jackson Heights, in Queens, a neighbourhood with a high population of Latinos and Latinas, known for establishments that welcome gay and lesbian customers? How might the heterosexual residents in that neighbourhood view their gay and lesbian neighbours, particularly when they share the same racial minority status. In France, it is impossible to find a neighbourhood comparable to Park Slope. Beyond the difference in the size of the two countries, the social, economic and political organization of sexuality in France does not encourage the development of gay neighbourhoods, apart from the Marais, and even less so with a marked lesbian visibility.

Defining Gayfriendliness

These methodological questions lead to a reflection on the definition of gayfriendliness. What are the frontiers between gayfriendly and homophobic positions? Sylvie Tissot does not seek to arbitrate between more or less positive opinions of homosexuality. But can the researcher use a term taken from the field, as it is understood by its users themselves, or should she invent a new concept? This old debate is not resolved here. The book does not provide a succinct and unique definition of gayfriendliness. The author prefers to leave it up to the reader to judge from her interviewees' own words, whether their attitudes form (or not) a coherent stance. Nonetheless, because the author does not decide, readers are left supposing that the people who responded to the her call for participants were included regardless of their ideas. And they are sometimes frankly hostile to homosexuality. Even people belonging to the French *grande bourgeoisie* who participated in the *Manif pour tous*, from whom the Marais gentrifiers would like to differentiate themselves, are capable of saying they are gayfriendly. But when one reproduces the discourse of the dominant, even from an analytical perspective, there is a risk of unintentionally reifying it. Straight people who live in the Marais and Park Slope do not have the prerogative when it comes to defending gays and lesbians, and Sylvie

Tissot does not claim this. However, readers who take her interviewees at their word may end up wrongly believing that they actually do represent a group that is more open minded than others.

Our current context is marked by a growing enthusiasm for rainbow coloured crosswalks in certain cities. Given these seemingly open-minded gimmicks, it is easy to forget that these municipalities have not necessarily stood out for their willingness to otherwise listen to the demands of their LGBT+ communities. Thanks to this book, we can now analyse this institutional gayfriendliness with a new critical gaze. Like State feminism and mainstream anti-racism, we see that these displays of tolerance can actually delegitimise radical demands and exonerate the dominant from their own responsibility in the reproduction of inequalities, all while giving them the opportunity to feel good about themselves.

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