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Seeking recognition: spatial justice vs heteronormativity

Marianne Blidon

Translator: Melanie Mauthner, Claire Hancock,

Abstract

This article examines spatial justice on the basis of theories of recognition inspired by Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser and the place of gays and lesbians in the French society. Its starting point is the idea that this group is being denied recognition (Fraser, 2005) as a result of the primacy of the heterosexual norm or heteronormativity, which affects them and gives them a place of second-class citizens. This article highlights the need for recognition in the face of the violence which renders gays and lesbians invisible and constitutes them as minority or 'other' subjects. It then examines this recognition with regard to access to public space, in terms of 'visibility regime' and in terms of parity of treatment in law. Finally, it shows how this spatial recognition was predominantly based on a neoliberal model that implies consumption, normalization and the exclusion of gays and lesbians subjects according to criteria of class and race.

Keywords

Recognition, heteronormativity, minority, gay marriage, gays and lesbians.

'Recognition is not about being polite to people: it is a vital necessity'
Charles Taylor (1992)

Preliminaries

As was shown by Foucault (1976), the nineteenth century was when a system to identify people based on their sexual practices was established, which led to constituting gays and lesbians as a minority group; minority both numerically and as 'those with the least social power' (Guillaumin, 1985, 19). Homosexuality went against the dominant norm and put the person in a position where s/he was always *discreditable* (Goffman 1975), or excluded (Becker, 1963 ; Éribon, 1999). Rommel Mendès Leite (2000) sees homosexuality as 'a problematic otherness for our Western society', while Adrienne Rich (1986) discussed 'compulsory heterosexuality', implying that heterosexuality is an institution before being a choice about whom we desire. In this context, the injustice stems less from relations of exploitation than from what Nancy Fraser (1998) terms 'cultural domination'¹ and Iris Marion Young (1990), 'cultural imperialism', making one social group invisible by establishing a supposedly universal norm, or even a 'natural' one in the case of heterosexuality. This imperialism constitutes lesbians and gays as 'other'. As Gervais-Lambony and Dufaux (2009, 11) explain: 'the oppressed social group is thus defined from the outside, even as it is rendered invisible and stereotyped.' Homosexuality is therefore a form of constant resistance, fragile and ever contested by the 'heterosexual epistemological privilege' (Sedgwick, 2008 ; Perreau, 2009). Moreover, to be gay also means confronting violence and verbal abuse in addition to having to fit into a social order and to conform to behaviours that continually remind us how marginalised and oppressed we are.

If a 'just' politics is, as Iris Marion Young (1990) has it, one that ends all forms of oppression, then social justice implies recognising and accepting otherness. For Young, this mainly means recognising specific oppressed groups; and Nancy Fraser builds on this noting, 'overcoming homophobia and heterosexism requires changing the cultural valuations (as well as their legal and

¹ "The second kind of injustice is cultural or symbolic. It is rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. Examples include cultural domination (being subjected to patterns of interpretation and communication that are associated with another culture and are alien and/or hostile to one's own); non-recognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions)" (Fraser, 1998, 22).

practical expressions) that privilege heterosexuality, deny equal respect to gays and lesbians, and refuse to recognize homosexuality as a legitimate way of being sexual' (Fraser, 1998, 27). However in France, this approach comes up against the problematic status of 'difference' (Hancock, 2009) and the difficulty there is to adopt a strategy based on a notion of collective identity (homosexuals vs heterosexuals). Social movements as well as individuals face dilemmas about strategies to counter domination and priorities: claim a right to difference or to indifference, claim visibility or invisibility, assert or conceal gay or lesbian identity. So many options that prove inadequate when trying to face up to the 'identity paradox', outlined here by David Halperin:

'gay identity is both politically necessary and disastrous at the same time. Vital, essential, indispensable because it is in constant danger of extinction and erasure. It must be fought for at all costs, tirelessly and all the more so because it is still seen as something deviant, pathological, to be ashamed of. Yet it remains a risky, treacherous identity that has to be rejected and resisted, because it plays a normalizing and even policing role in gay society and culture. It is politically disastrous because it is a handy way for society to keep tabs on sexual difference while at the same time stabilizing heterosexual identity. Gay identity is therefore both a homophobic identity in its broad aim to socialise and normalise and yet, to deny and reject this identity is clearly to comply with a homophobic stance' (1998, 117-118).

This article does not aim to solve this dilemma, but takes it as a starting point and an opportunity to develop a critical approach centred on space, rather than on a reified gay identity. This approach both uncovers the spatial dimensions of injustice and allows to rethink social relations in all their complexity and their articulations in daily life. Drawing on empirical data collected since 2003² and a review of the relevant literature in social science, I will try to see whether what Nancy Fraser (2005) terms 'the remedy to cultural injustices linked to recognition' is likely to get us closer to an ideal of social justice. So firstly, I shall give an overview of the main issues facing lesbians and gays, in particular violence and how it affects their experience of proximity or physical distance. Secondly, I look at the PACS (Pacte civil de solidarité or civil partnership) to see how spatial differentiation entrenches inequalities between couples and institutionalizes a hierarchy of sexualities. Lastly, I shall illustrate how rooted in neo-liberalism this spatial recognition is, how reliant it has become on consumption, and on forms of normalization and exclusion of some gay and lesbian subjects on grounds of their class or race.

1 Experience, practice and relations to the world under constraint

In the introduction above, I emphasized the importance of norms: these are enforced with the injunction of violence.

In the beginning, there was violence

Lesbians and gays experience different degrees of homophobic threat, in the forms of verbal abuse or physical violence. For Didier Éribon, insults form a key part of gay experiences: 'in the beginning, there is the insult, the one that any gay person is likely to hear at any moment of his life, and which signals his psychological and social vulnerability [...] Insults, in the way they frame and mediate the way we relate to the world, leave children and teenagers feeling they have transgressed the social order, it gives an enduring sense of insecurity and anxiety, often even of terror and panic' (Éribon, 1999, 29 and 99). It is precisely this entrenched fear that leaps out from Tom's account, an American who has been living in Paris since the 1990s:

² In 2003 I began my research with a detailed analysis of the lesbian and gay press, tourist guides and audio-visual archive material at the INA (Institut National de l'Audiovisuel) before conducting seventy semi-structured interviews as well as observation work mainly in Paris, Le Mans and Marseille. In addition, I ran an online survey via têtù.com with 3,587 respondents including follow-up questionnaires that I distributed to a hundred of them. Some of the results appeared in my PhD thesis in 2007.

'As a gay man I'm scared that I'm about to get a brick in my face but I never know where it's going to come from. [Turning to face his partner] If I touch you in public or kiss you, I don't know where that brick's going to come from that will crack my head open and me, I'm not convinced it's guys from the *banlieues* who'll be holding that brick, it can come from anywhere. [...] When I was studying in the US, on campus, there was a student with a megaphone screaming homophobic abuse from his window at people walking by. I complained [...] and because I did that, afterwards on my door there was a lot of abuse, 'gay jerk' and all that... I was young then but my whole life, the whole time, that's what it's like. [...] I just live with this fear' (interview, 2007).

Tom's comment reveals how wrong it would be to locate homophobia in a specific setting and link it either to provincial and rural area or a peripheral one like the notorious *banlieues*, often contrasted with central areas of large cities, assumed to be open and tolerant of difference. Tom, who lives in Paris' sixteenth *arrondissement*, a very *bourgeois* district, has experienced all kinds of homophobia both among educated people among his peers at university as well as on the part of working-class people (he mentions a plumber who peppered his conversation with homophobic insults). Éric Fassin (2010) classifies homophobia according to three types: 'old style' homophobia or 'Daddy homophobia'; 'threatening homophobia' that is politically instrumentalized and depicted as essentially working-class and associated with immigrant communities; and a 'society homophobia', more shadowy, which uses essentialist and psychoanalytic rhetoric to defend the 'symbolic order'. One of the consequences of this hovering shadow and pervasive threat is the constitution of specific places and networks that provide a protection³, as opposed to others, especially public spaces, in which it is always necessary to watch one's self-presentation.

Right to the city and regimes of in/visibility

Space shapes our life experiences and social interactions. Lesbians and gays' relations with public space are best summed up by invisibility, apart from a few exceptions in specific locations and at particular times of the year such as annual Gay Pride marches. This invisibility clearly affects representations of lesbians and gays in public, indeed images of homosexuality are routinely censored (photos 1 et 3) or regularly defaced (photo 2) (Blidon, 2008c). Yet it is precisely these public spaces that should allow for the expression, performance and assertion of social identities. 'Public discursive arenas are among the most important and underrecognized sites in which social identities are constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed' (Fraser, 1992, 140). Clearly, the limitations of what can and cannot be represented has crucial consequences for lesbians and gays.



³ Gilbert Herdt and Andrew Boxer's work (1996) on Chicago showed how collective visibility, for example in the context of shops, bars, clubs and other businesses, enabled teenagers to come out and accept their sexuality at an increasingly younger age.

Photographs 1 to 3 - Transgressive bodies

Norms apply first to self-presentation and how one handles intimate gestures in public. Holding hands or kissing in public are simple gestures gay and lesbian people do not allow themselves, in particular near the places where they live (see table 1) or which are carefully assessed by a sort of casuistry (at night, in dark deserted streets or else in the midst of a frenetic crowd, in the Marais or miles away in the countryside) that says a lot of the threat of symbolic violence (Blidon, 2008a, 2008b).

Tranches d'unité urbaine (INSEE, 1990) Répondants déclarent (n= 2 642*)	Rural	<10 000 hbts	10 à 50 000 hbts	50 à 100 000 hbts
Se tenir par la main (in)	41%	27%	42%	32%
Se tenir par la main (out)	70%	63%	66%	52%
S'embrasser (in)	36%	18%	35%	31%
S'embrasser (out)	62%	49%	62%	50%

Tranches d'unité urbaine (INSEE, 1990) Répondants déclarent (n= 2 642*)	100 à 200 000 hbts	200 à 2 millions hbts	Paris	Banlieue Parisienne
Se tenir par la main (in)	39%	39%	42%	35%
Se tenir par la main (out)	66%	63%	63%	61%
S'embrasser (in)	34%	34%	38%	35%
S'embrasser (out)	58%	53%	52%	58%

* n = 2 642 car 528 tranches d'unit  urbaines n'ont pu  tre d termin es

Questions :

« L     vous vivez (in),

vous est-il arriv  de tenir votre partenaire par la main ? oui/non »

« Ailleurs (out),

vous est-il arriv  de tenir votre partenaire par la main ? oui/non »

M mes questions avec

« vous est-il arriv  d'embrasser publiquement votre partenaire »

Source : sondage sur les parcours (Blidon/tetu.com, 2007)

Table 1 – Allowed gestures in different environments

This self-censorship and these precautions taken by lesbians and gays raise the issue of access to public space and beyond, the question of their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1991). Pierre Bourdieu, regarding the social status of lesbigays, talks about 'a denial of public existence' (1998b, 45) and Judith Butler, of an 'ontologically suspended mode' (2004, 160). For Butler these normative restrictions not only render certain social groups invisible, they remain visible, but their presence is

contained by a discourse of erasure that 'condemns one part of the population to live in a liminal place where they are both human and inhuman' (2005, 50). Thus we should pay attention to what shapes our cities, the product of heteronormative discourse and the effect of this discourse on people. Issues of access to public space, how and where we access it need rethinking in light of these mechanisms of categorization, normative injunctions and bodily discipline. This is indispensable if we are to re-imagine the metropolis as a space of freedom and possibility for all.

2- Which spaces does recognition take place in?

In this context a new politics giving lesbians and gays due recognition would lead to greater visibility and civil rights. Their experience of urban spaces is not characterized by segregation or exclusion but rather by a constant injunction to remain invisible, which relegates homosexuality to the private sphere or the closet.

Coming out of the closet: from theory to practice

The term closet refers to the concealment of gay identities (to remain in the closet) as opposed to coming out of the closet. This act of emerging, switching from hidden homosexuality to exposed homosexuality, has to do with a rejection of shame, silence and discretion. It is part of an individual quest for recognition (coming out) or a collective action, in Gay Pride marches (Fassin, 2005).

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) made clear, the closet does not define an inside or outside in any fixed way. An individual is never fully out because coming out, as Éribon (2003, 365) says is 'an act we must continually perform'. Also, as Mangeot (2003, 131) reminds us, 'to reveal one's homosexuality assigns one to a place and closes one up in an identity through which everything is to make sense'. On the other hand, social means of controlling information 'that attempt to conceal, even erase any sign that happens to symbolize the stigma' (Goffman, 1963) cannot be guaranteed to work. Gays and lesbians who hide their identities never really know how much others know about them. Neither concealment nor disclosure can ever be total, and one is never really completely closeted. As Fassin (2005) suggests, the closet remains makeshift and mobile and heterosexuals remain in control of it by virtue of their epistemic privilege. For homosexuality remains the norm that lesbigays continue to be defined against. 'In other words,' As Fassin says (Ibid, 131), 'coming out of the closet, rather than putting an end to homophobia actually transfers it to other spheres: it endlessly reasserts categories and legitimizes a hierarchy of sexualities over which only heterosexuals have actual and symbolic mastery'.

This same reassertion of norms takes place at the collective level. The Gay Pride marches, the first of which took place in 1970 in New York with *come out!* as motto, have unfolded in so many cities, from Cape Town to Sydney via Tel Aviv, that they have now become a tourist attraction (Johnston, 2005). Often compared with Carnival because they occur once a year as a public urban celebration with floats, music and dancing, these marches do embody a sort of public pagan rejoicing, an annual ritual that gives voice to a shared frustration with lingering sexual discrimination, that tolerates sexual carousing and exuberance, a certain licentiousness, transgresses norms through a parody of traditional sex and gender norms, vent our anguish and appetite for revenge whether personal or against the social order... Indeed, the latter dimension, which as Butler (1990) says, troubles gender, tends to be overlooked, while the former, which makes the Gay Pride a massive street party which federates for one day diverse people who do not necessarily subscribe to the underlying political claims, has become dominant (Blidon, 2009). In Berlin during the Gay Pride march of June 2010, Judith Butler took a stand and publicly refused the *Zivilcourage* that she was awarded in protest at what she saw to be a 'commercial and superficial' demonstration. Gay Pride marches can be seen as an interrupted project of collective *coming out* that has been trivialised and hijacked so that far from challenging the established order, it can be seen as reasserting and reproducing it. Thus, during Manchester's three-day Gay Pride the gay area is practically sealed off,

the only way to take part in the celebration is to pay a fee: fifteen pounds for a day ticket or twenty-five pounds for a three-day pass in 2008. So what began as a collective display of strength, a collective take over of public space has turned into a commercial event, a closely monitored festival with security staff; in effect a mass rally stripped of its original political substance.

Gay pride marches as well as individual acts of coming out clearly are not a sound basis on which to build a politics of recognition; especially when this takes the form of an injunction, a new *imperative of truth* (Fassin, 2005), or a performance that ends up 'being domesticated and circulated again as instrument of cultural domination (in this instance, neo-liberalism)' (Butler, 1990). One could then expect recognition to come from lawmakers.

Space and institutionalization of sexual hierarchy

'What next, soon they'll have us hold our civil partnership ceremony at the police station!'

Pascal, 43 years old

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees equal treatment - all human beings are 'equal in dignity and rights' (article 1) and safety - 'every individual has the right to life, liberty and security of person' (article 3). No society could be considered just that did not apply these two principles. Yet, in many parts of the world these rights are denied to lesbians and gays and in several countries, they face harsh reprisals for being gay including the death penalty⁴. Violence, and the denial of recognition, here comes from institutions and the state. This led Boris Dittrich, *Human Rights Watch* programme director of lesbian, bisexual and transgendered rights to say that 'universal means universal with no exceptions'. Homosexuality was removed from the WHO's list of mental illnesses as late as 1993. French law only moved forward in the early 1980s with the repeal of the Mirguet amendment (1960), a piece of legislation aimed at purging certain 'social scourges', and the repeal of the Penal Code's article 331-2, which set the universal age of consent at the age of fifteen. So the legal landscape has evolved in a way that gradually grants recognitions to lesbians and gays, though it remains profoundly unequal. Indeed, as far as marriage and parental rights are concerned French lags behind both European counterparts and social practices.

This legal discrimination really came to the fore in the context of the PACS, a legal framework offering some form of recognition to same-sex couples, who until then has no form of legal recognition. This injustice became obvious during the AIDS crisis when many were evicted from their homes, barred from attending their loved one's funeral, often with no inheritance rights. However, the PACS does not promise marriage rights, nor does it guarantee parental rights (including adoption, fertility treatment or custody rights to gay parents⁵), yet neither does it grant gays and lesbians specific rights⁶. This attitude according to Wilfried Rault is

'typical of the law's ambivalence to the social status of homosexuality. Indeed, on the one hand, the law takes account of discrimination, but by so doing it organizes the lesser visibility, entrenches a difference in status and treatment with opposite-sex couples. The PACS is not recorded by the registry office, "the individual as seen and legitimized by the state", which means the heterosexual relationship is privileged over the homosexual one' (2007, 197).

In this context, making the district court the place for registering these partnerships clearly demarcates this ceremony from that of marriage (which takes place at the mairie or town hall)

⁴ On this issue, see the work of the International Commission on Human Rights on lesbians and gays (IGLHRC - www.iglhrc.org) and reports from international organisations such as Amnesty International (www.amnesty.org) and Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org).

⁵ See in particular the volume edited by Anne Cadoret, Martine Gross, Caroline Mécaray and Bruno Perreau (2006) *Homoparentalités. Approches scientifiques et politiques*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

⁶ In this regard the PACS is not a 'positive action' although it could have led in theory to greater equality. See Bruno Perreau who analyzes it as 'simultaneously a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution' (Perreau, 2004, 42).

(photos 4 and 5). This distinction between the two sites selected for each ceremony makes the PACS appear as a 'sub-marriage' as Alain Piriou, the Inter-LGBT spokesperson sees it (14 November 2007).



Photo 4 - Mairie/town Hall
(Paris, Xve, 2005)



Photo 5 - Tribunal d'instance: court of first
instance (Paris, Xve, 2005)

Striving to avoid the parallel with marriage, lawmakers settled on the district court, *tribunal d'instance*, a court that usually deals with petty claims and neighbourly conflicts. In addition, the PACS is recorded by a court clerk, a civil servant, and not by an elected representative of the people; not exactly a promising venue for enshrining a couple's rite of passage. With nothing to mark the event as a celebration or even a collective ritual, the way that the PACS is implemented smacks of bureaucracy, a far cry from the hopes and aspirations of couples who want to pledge their commitment to each other surrounded by their kin. The CRSH [Committee for the Social Recognition of Lesbians and Gays] in a statement declared itself to be

'very committed to seeing that the PACS be signed in the town hall as a symbol of people's participation in city life and citizenship. It is really not suitable for the partnership to be registered by the clerk of the court as planned. The court is the place for settling family disputes, it is an unsuitable venue to celebrate a partnership based on ties of affection. The place will give meaning to the PACS. It is inconceivable for it not to be recorded at the town hall where certificates of cohabitation are delivered.'

This question is a hotly debated. Practices differ widely from one borough to another. So in the second *arrondissement* the mayor's suggestions for PACS ceremonies at the town hall included these comments: 'As mayor of Paris' second *arrondissement* I am thrilled to welcome you and your friends and families to the town hall. [...] The reason I wanted to welcome you here in the town hall for this ceremony is to remind you that this building is your building, open to all of you without exception. Gathering here today for this event is, to my mind, part and parcel of my duty as your elected representative. This ceremony enshrined by our republic is an opportunity to share and celebrate this special occasion with your loved ones [...] I wanted this to be something more than just a formal official document that you sign before the clerk of the court. [...] And to crown the day, let's heed the words of René Char, illustrious poet and fighter of the Resistance: "Imposez votre

chance ! Serrez votre bonheur !/Allez ensemble prendre vos risques !/... A vous regarder, ils s'habitueront !"

Be fully happy together. One of the Republic's missions is to give all its citizens freedom of choice. So in the name of the Republic I wish you all the very best for a lifetime of happiness. We shall now sign the documents, with your witnesses, as a sign of the commitment you're taking here at the town hall» (<http://mairie2.paris.fr>).

Conversely, during the local council meeting in Vincennes on 22 February 2006, when Pierre Verne speaking on behalf of the Green councillors asked the UDF (Union pour la Démocratie Française, a center-right party) mayor about the possibility of holding PACS ceremonies in the town hall, the latter replied: 'signing the PACS as a private contract at the town hall would conform neither to the letter nor the spirit of the document as its legal status relies on it being signed and ratified by the court of first instance'

(Response from mayor Laurent Lafon).

Box 1 – District court or town hall?

As Wilfried Rault notes, 'although meant as an official sanction of new partnerships, the way they are registered actually emphasizes their confidentiality and denies their symbolic value' (2007, 201). In this way the PACS appears as another 'denial of recognition' rather than as a 'social innovation'⁷ for lesbians and gays. To address the injustice would imply opening up marriage and parental rights to same-sex couples or chipping away at marriage as an institution with specific rights (fiscal, social) conditioned by marital status (Fraser, 1998).

So, for example, opening up marriage and parental rights to all couples would be one step towards recognition. Nevertheless, this basic measure seems inadequate, since it does not address cultural domination, and it is likely to worsen economic domination.⁸ In addition, this form of recognition would clearly be modelled on straight notions of coupledness and family life that are not shared by all. And lastly, means and resources to access rights and organize resistance are not equally distributed (Browne, 2011)⁹.

3- What type of recognition?

'When you come out of hiding, you're not suddenly going to shout from the rooftops!'

Jean Le Bitoux (2003)

As David Halperin emphasized, treating lesbians and gays as a homogenous social group suffering only from a denial of recognition would spell political disaster.

'The overall effect is to impose a single, drastically simplified group-identity which denies the complexity of people's lives, the multiplicity of their identifications and the cross-pulls of their various affiliations. Ironically, then, the identity model serves as a vehicle for misrecognition' (Fraser, 2000, 112).

This is one reason why in this power/knowledge dynamic, it is crucial to listen to those dissident voices that clamour against this model of identity politics and to give them a platform.

⁷ 'An innovative legal measure, the PACS can be seen as a social innovation when we consider that by 31st December 2005 this new social practice had lured more than 400,000 people' (Jaurand, Leroy, 2009). This view has to be qualified, since a large majority of PACS are opposite-sex unions (94% in 2009 according to the INSEE), and among those that are not the rate of dissolution is high ('at the beginning of 2004, only 5000 people were still engaged in a PACS with a person of the same sex', INSEE survey "Revenus fiscaux et sociaux").

⁸ See Browne, 2011, for a discussion of the economic issues associated with gay marriage.

⁹ 'money, materialities and engagements with 'the state' continue to define everyday lives for often the most vulnerable lesbians, gay men, bisexual and trans people' (Browne, 2011, 102)

Consumerism: the road to recognition?

'Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon [...] The postmodernist penchant for encouraging the formation of market niches—in both consumer habits and cultural forms—surrounds the contemporary urban experience with an aura of freedom of choice, provided you have the money.' (Harvey, 2008, 24-31)

David Harvey's reminder sounds a cautionary note regarding Richard Florida's popular notion of a *creative class* whose ability to decide where they want to live tends to favour areas known for their tolerance and creative potential, spaces identifiable in terms of their ranking by the *diversity index* or *gay index*. These indexes reflect the implication of white, upper middle-class gays, the archetypical dinkies (double income no kids), which are by no means representative of the average gay man let alone lesbian. These are the main gentrifiers of downtown neighbourhoods, whether the Marais in Paris or Castro in San Francisco. These neighbourhoods experienced as places to be free, to emancipate and come out are a product of neoliberal capitalism. There is a price-tag on this sort of recognition.

Ever since the 1990s gay activists have raised their voices in protest at this economic exploitation of gay identities. As Jean Le Bitoux explains:

'the first hangouts in the Marais like *Duplex*, *Piano Zinc* or *Les Mots à la Bouche* bookshop were set up by pioneers who were convinced that it was necessary to turn our backs on gay snobbery, gay mafia and shame. These places that became landmarks are now paradoxically those that remain most open and diverse. They knew that the most important was not to render visible realities that had been concealed for too long, and that going too far could create social allergies and a loss of meaning. Other were more cynical and went for, more than mere visibility, all-out publicity of this social modernity.'¹⁰

Present-day Marais has undergone socio-economic shifts which are visible in the shopping environment. So some of the Jewish bookshops, galleries delicatessens such as the well-established Goldenberg's on rue des Rosiers, or the gay shops on rue du Bourg Tibourg have closed down to make way for shops selling clothes or accessories to tourists or well-off shoppers, reinforcing the 'loss of the neighbourhood's identity',¹¹ which benefits a new cosmopolitan and homogenous social elite.

This kind of recognition rooted in class-connoted behaviours and patterns of consumption has gradually ended the area's reputation for tolerance, openness and social inclusiveness. While this may still be the case for sex clubs such as *le Dépôt*, social mingling has declined, as Hadrien comments:

'You can't help but notice that guys out cruising in gay dives are slightly intolerant about your job or your bank account. All of us have come across those 'credit card babes' who only cosy up to you if you can order two bottles at seventy euros a pop without flinching. You know, those really sassy queens who just give you the once over and know how much your kit costs... Prada-Dior-Saint Laurent? You have a PACS offer coming your way. Celio-Bata-Clockhouse? She won't even look at you. But there is even worse than that. When the one you fancy comes out with this killer question, then you really know you're doomed: 'so what line of work are you in?' What do you say to a banker when you're a driver/delivery man? What do you say to a law professor on the international circuit when you're struggling performing artist? It has to be awful to drag your banker to your migrant's hostel. The eternal love/savings account dilemma has been a real damp

¹⁰ Jean Le Bitoux, 1996: 'Strolling through gay Marais'. *La Revue h*, number 1, 49.

¹¹ As Colin Giraud writes: 'as if opening up to others, getting involved in a local setting went hand in hand with a loss of one's identity in the spirit of the place. Apart from a few strongholds in the gay business community, this model of loss seems to lie at the heart of the Marais today' (Giraud, 2009, 43).

squib for any lingering illusions we may still have about love transcending social class. Believe you me, I'm talking to you as a lowly fast-food waiter.¹²

These social relations plagued by unequal status both financial and social are indicative of forms of oppression that Philippe Gervais-Lambony and Frédéric Dufaux see as exploitation,

'linked to capitalism, this is a form of oppression of the lower income groups, who not only do not receive a fair share of the proceeds of their work, but who also remain excluded from decision-making processes, have less freedom to make choices and whose their collective identity often goes unrecognised' (Gervais, Dufaux, 2009, 7)

Not only is there a price-tag on recognition, but there are other selection criteria.

Recognition, exclusion and normalisation

'All women are white,
all Blacks are men
but some of us are brave'
Black Feminist Collective (1982)

Apart from a handful of bars and clubs, Black lesbians and gays also find it hard to feel comfortable in the gay milieu. The '*racaille*' (racialised thug) figures prominently in gay pornographic and erotic imagination (Cervulle, Rees-Roberts, 2010). And yet at the same time, there is a marked tendency to reduce gays from immigrant backgrounds to prevailing stereotypes, to see them as homophobic, or as potential trouble-makers. Yacine (24 years-old, from la Courneuve) talks about this ambivalence: 'I'm a guy people are wary of, flirt with...but they're scared of me...yeah, I get propositioned because they're scared of me'¹³. Edith echoes Yacine's bitterness, 'they want to sleep with you sure, but they're not going to take a dark face out to dinner'¹⁴. One *Têtu* journalist made a similar point: 'the space Black gays hold in the realm of fantasy is in inverse proportion to the social space and recognition that they are denied, in their everyday lives'¹⁵. Thus these types of perceptions and assumptions make it difficult for these men, *a fortiori* as a group, to be accepted. Rachid (editor aged 34, from Saint-Ouen, from an Egyptian background) explains: 'yeah, they put up with us in nightclubs, as long as we're effeminate, dressed up and we fit in. One night, I was in quite a mellow dive in the Marais with a buddy, the waiter comes up to us and says: 'you know, you're in a gay bar here.' We realised we were out of place.'¹⁶ This explains why other spots in the Pigalle area, for instance, have started to take over as meeting places. So for some, the Marais has turned into a rather exclusive neighbourhood 'lacking in social diversity' and really aimed at a 'white moneyed majority who want to flaunt it.'

These examples help illustrate just how hard it is to think of 'the other' as a subject, especially when 'this other' has been constructed in our collective imaginary as dangerous, reduced to certain traits without taking into account other differences such as age, class, life journey or lifestyle... Hence the emphasis put on *nomadism* by the *6th of November Group: lesbian daughters of colonialism, slavery and immigration*. They reject normative assignments to traditional roles as mother, wife,

¹² 'Readers' Letters,' *Têtu*, number 79, June 2003, p.12. The broadsheet press, especially letters from readers, is a treasure trove for exploring these kinds of issues. See also Patrick Awondo's research (EHESS, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) that tackles this topic. Social researchers have tended to focus on gay men rather than lesbians but this is starting to change, see in particular the 2009 'Lesbians, migration, exile and racism: when minorities get involved' conference organised at Paris 8 University by Salima Amari, Jules Falquet, Jane Freedman, Dalila Kadri, Claudie Lesselier, Amazighe Tilila and Anna Pak.

¹³ *Têtu*, number 9, December 1996, p. 26.

¹⁴ *Illico Magazine*, number 14, January 1992, p. 15.

¹⁵ *Têtu*, number 9, December 1996, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Têtu*, number 9, December 1996, p. 25.

symbol of post-colonial culture and 'enslaved woman' (Bacchetta, 2009). One of this group's slogans was 'We exist', a claim for visibility, a protest against erasure from the lesbian scene and a challenge to the *French WASPS* who overlook the wounds of colonialism and racism. As Hanan Kaddour puts it:

'the barriers between us and them are historical and political, they can't be dismantled just by virtue of these French WASPS pretending to be women-lovers. Whether they choose to love women, bees or poppies doesn't make them any closer to us lesbians from migrant and working-class backgrounds' (2001).

This *6th of November Group* holds its meetings not in the usual lesbian venues they tend to feel excluded from but in a Caribbean restaurant owned by two women in the centre of Paris. This decision illustrates their refusal to be consigned to the margins, the periphery they are relegated to, and the tension between lesbian identity and ties to postcolonial countries. This tension was exposed by their presence, some of them wearing the veil, in the national march organised in 2004 by collective *Une Ecole pour tous/tes*.

'In this context, with the French state and public opinion claiming they are feminist and pro-gay and that it is a sign of the civilizational superiority of France (as opposed to the so-called inferiority of colonized and postcolonial countries) lesbians who wear the veil are deeply problematic citizens. They do not conform to the stereotype of "the" Muslim woman, the victim of Muslim men and Islam's inherent sexism or as left out of French sexual equality. Neither can they be allowed to embody the liberated queer, this position remains a prerogative of franco-French lesbians in the context of the dominant sexual and social paradigm' (Bacchetta, 2009, 57).

As Paola Bacchetta goes on to say, 'as long as the dominant powers that be continue to display binary and separatist thinking, then the *6th of November Group*, its members, associates and protests will remain undecipherable to many' (2009, 60).

One effect of this politics of recognition initiated in the early 1980s, and of the commercialisation of gay identity in the 1990s, is the erasure of relations of class and domination that were replaced by 'a political handling of division' (Prearo, 2010). This makes it all the more urgent to work towards building a social movement that does not fragment or rank struggles for recognition but which admit that gender, sexuality, race, class all produce forms of domination.

Epilogue

Sites of resistance to domination have come into existence in the form of groups, organisations, single-sex or mixed squats, separatist communes, housing cooperatives such as the Women's Haven in the south of France... a host of spaces that challenge traditional viewpoints and provide forms of support for lesbian or queer 'constellations' (Giesecking, 2009). Many of these associations are not primarily motivated by individual or collective visibility, for in the words of Léo Bersani, 'accepting to be seen is accepting to be controlled' (1995, 34), thus demonstrating that recognition does not imply transparency. What they are looking for, primarily, is a place of their own, a visible one. This implies what Natacha Chetcuti (2009) refers to as 'seeking a human status for beings in the process of becoming', taking shape in a number of ways, for example, 'steering clear from constructions of femininity or new definitions of otherness in order to newly interrogate links between sex and gender'. It also implies challenging social injustices that enable some to be seen as individuals, while others are constantly referred to a group they are seen as being part of. This also calls for what Soja (2009) calls the 'equitable and fair distribution in space of socially valued resources and of the possibility of exploiting them', which means some of those spaces operate as autonomous cooperatives with a pooling of resources. Although these *alternative spaces* are unlikely to

generalize, they clearly embody a new politics of recognition and redistribution, a starting point in the constitution of just spaces.

About the author : Marianne **BLIDON**, UMR 8504 Géographie-cité, Université Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne

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