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The Politics of Global Gay Identity: Towards a Universal History

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Abstract

Through the years, the LGBT community has established a universal network of social relations for homosexual people, defying social, cultural and political borders. What is promoted is a global community that shares a common historical past and an array of invented/established traditions that venerates it. Historically, the LGBT community has valorized the Stonewall riots of 1969 as the nodal point of gay and lesbian politicization and June has been set up as the month of LGBT Pride in order to keep the memory of homosexual revolution and liberation alive. Yet, the Stonewall riots along with the impulse of the LGBT movement and its subsequent traditions have been defined as solely Western practices that predominantly derive from the American experience of the incidents, thus excluding non-Western perspectives. Furthermore, the ideal global community often requires a common, unified identity based on codes and symbols of LGBT history. In my paper, I would argue that the politics of the gay community, despite its Western-oriented milieu, have managed to promote and affirm a universal gay identity through invented traditions in order to provide a “home,” to project an imagined community that evades cultural, social, and racial frontiers, but above all to make this idea of “home” an available option.

Keywords: LGBT studies, identity, globalization, cultural studies

Perceiving the world as a global village where cultures converge and information is freely shared has been contested. Indeed, the conundrums posed from the effect of globalization have redefined this idea of the global village and nations have turned to set up physical and cultural barriers again in order to protect their own cultural heritage from external corruption. Glocalization¹ is now forwarded as the ideological discourse that moves towards supporting ethnic distinctiveness, yet does not completely obstruct intercultural exchanges. Nevertheless, it is still hard for people to shake off the remnants of globalization and the need to belong in the vast global village is still prevalent. This sense of belonging, as inextricably tied to bonds within communities – where one “feels at home” – is an idea based on and solidified by common experiences between groups of

¹ Initially introduced by sociologist Roland Robertson, the theory of glocalization, according to B. Kumaravadivelu, suggests “that cultural transmission is a two-way process in which cultures in contact shape and reshape each other directly or indirectly” (44-45). The global and the local, the writer adds, are “the two sides of the same process in which the global is brought in conjunction with the local, and the local is modified to accommodate the global” (44-45). In the current era of social networks and worldwide electronic platforms the notion of cultures in contact transfers the cultural conjunction in the cyber world.

people. The LGBT community – or simply gay community – stands paradigmatic to the realization of this idea, hence promoting a universal history for the formation of a global identity. Seeing the 1969 Stonewall riots as the nodal point of the gay and lesbian movement,² the history of LGBT culture has been rendered universal, thus embracing social, political, cultural and racial diversity through practices of established traditions and codes. However, the Western impulse in the historicity of the culture is hard to miss, a matter that has instigated sociological and academic debates in defense of non-Western cultures threatened by homogenization. In this paper, I would argue that the politics of the gay community, despite its Western-oriented milieu, has managed to promote and affirm a universal gay identity through invented traditions in order to provide a “home,” to project an imagined community that evades cultural, social, and racial frontiers, but above all to make this idea of “home” an available option.

In order to understand how these traditions work, it is of prior importance to acknowledge the centrality of the Stonewall riots in the LGBT history and, therefore, perceive it as the core of the political gay identity. In June 28, 1969, police raids on gay bars over the last years climax at the Stonewall Inn, Greenwich Village, NY. The historical moment marks the beginning of the gay and lesbian struggle for equality, giving birth to the gay civil rights movement (Duberman, i) Along with the women’s movement, the gay movement opened the road for sexual liberation, thus breaking the shackles of – or at least, deliver noteworthy blows on – patriarchal and heteronormative oppressions. Interestingly enough, this extensive quote from Ken Plummer’s work *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience* presents a trajectory of the politicization of homosexuality, explaining that its origins:

“may be seen to start in Germany with the Magnus Hirschfeld Institute and the early gay rights movement, spread to various key locales in Europe (notably the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands), diffusing to the United States before a radical world-wide symbolism (typically USA imperialism), erupts through the Stonewall imagery of 1969, ultimately with Castro Street, West Hollywood, and the Greenwich Village as the prototype of the future! [...] For some it has been the Americanization of homosexuality” (16).

Consequently, the Stonewall riots, despite being the political culmination and discharge of a years-long process, have been valorized as the most catalytic point in LGBT history. Inevitably, the political nature of homosexuality directs attention to the West, thus rendering non-Western perspectives invisible.

For the above reason, the western background of the gay liberation movement has become a source of sociopolitical debate. Social analysts and academic writers argue that what Stonewall advocates is based on Western considerations and experiences regarding homosexuality and its social containment. Martin F. Manalansan IV supports that “[g]ay within [the] view of Stonewall is defined within a temporalized understanding of both

² “The 1969 riots,” according to Martin Duberman, “are now generally taken to mark the birth of the modern gay and lesbian political movement – that moment in time when gays and lesbians recognized all at once their mistreatment and their solidarity” (i).

sexuality and society” (210, italics in text). Under this premise, the writer asserts that “gay gains meaning according to a developmental narrative that begins with an unliberated, ‘prepolitical’ homosexual practice and that culminates in a liberated, ‘out,’ politicized, ‘modern,’ ‘gay’ subjectivity” (210). This mold of gay identity, however, has been fashioned out of the political and social conditions that American homosexual minoritarian subject underwent. Therefore, transferring the political discourse of American gay experience on a worldwide level presupposes that every country following the Stonewall model and the ideological politics produced by the subsequent social movements is ultimately putting cultural distinctiveness in jeopardy. Peter M. Nardi reiterates that “local cultural norms have to be accommodated for the movement to become visible, organized, and relevant” (581). “To politicize identity in a country which has not experienced an openly anti-gay movement,” Nardi maintains, “require[s] much effort on the part of those who were motivated to seek change” (581). Espousing the American and/or the Western pattern, in a way, deprives a nation from developing a political route and social change of its own idiosyncrasy.

Apart from cultural flattening, though, the occidental sway seems to instill the gay identity an urban middle-class ethos. The American pre- and post-Stonewall social movements for sexual equality flourished in urban metropolises, such as New York and San Francisco. These culturally diverse centers allowed contact and interaction between people of different backgrounds. As a matter of fact, the urban scene promoted the collective identity a social movement demands develop and flourish. In addition, urban centers underwent the necessary socio-political awakening that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had accomplished; apparently, the African-American struggle had paved the way for the following movements, including the women and the gay’s movement. Yet, “the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s,” according to Steve Valocchi, “did not simply borrow the ideological material from the earlier movements in the 1960s protest wave, nor did it simply combine that material with the ideological material of the gay movement of the 1950s and 1960s in some additive way” (447, 2001). For the writer, the formation happened through the alignment of the individual identity with the collective one under the gird of the movement (448, 2001). In order for this alignment to be realized, though, there has to be a fusion of two essential elements: interaction and visibility. As has been mentioned above, the metro-/cosmopolitan scene provided the former. How, then, was the latter achieved?

Visibility for the 1960s and 1970s gay identity was achieved in a double manner. Extrinsicly, the gay individuals protested their right for equality with demonstrations and marches, a manner similar to the Civil Rights model. Valocchi affirms that the “civil rights movement [...] provided the nascent gay movement with the language and politics of minority groups” (217, 1999). “Further, the movement for black equality,” he adds, “proved quite seductive to many middle class men and women who were captivated by its energy and the attention it received” (217, 1999). The radicalism of the 1960s African-American movement, thus, became an impulse that affected most gay movements assembled after the Stonewall riots, such as the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA). Evidently, according to John Gallagher and Chris Bull’s article

“Perfect Enemies: The Religious Rights, The Gay Movement and the Politics of the 1990s,” “the gay movement was deeply influenced by the left-wing and antiwar movements and the hippie counterculture of the 1960s.”³ However, this radicalism alone would not have managed to gain visibility. In fact, the ideological frames regarding homosexuality would only deteriorate had the gay movements remained attached to radical tactics. This is the reason why a second route had to be followed.

Intrinsically, what breathed essence for the gay minority to be visible was its conjuncture with the rising post-War consumer culture. After World War II, the thriving American economy transformed social conditions and rendered consumerism an inextricable part of reality. The indictment of the gay politics sought to incorporate in its dialectics a discourse that would take full advantage of the American capitalist condition. For Valocchi, “the minority group language involved calls for incorporation, state protection, or changes in state practices so that members of the sub-ordinate group could enjoy fully the benefits of capitalist society” (219, 1999). This language appealed to all minoritarian-oriented movements that protested for equal rights, such as black and women’s movement. Taking into consideration that visibility had to be achieved by “coming out,” the gay identity of the early 1970s had to gain territories in the socio-cultural milieu of capitalist America. “Since that identity had been privatized for so long,” Valocchi iterates, “the chief task of the movement was to construct a set of social institutions, practices, and cultural traditions that asserted a public identity” (220, 1999). Hence, the reassignment of the private gay identity in the open “commercialized sphere” where gay “bars, stores, and neighborhoods” along with “products, images and entertainments” provided new standards for its essential dynamics (Valocchi 220, 1999). This openness, heretofore, was – and still is – inscribed in the core of gay identity, which was coexistent, as has been argued, with collectivity.

Prior to diving in these practices of established traditions that derived from these new standards, it is important to distinguish between formation and reformation of identity. It would be erroneous to claim that the Stonewall equivalent produced a totally new collective gay identity. Nardi clarifies that “[t]he emergence of visible gay communities and gay identities in Europe can be traced to various early movements, in particular to Germany in the late 19th century, Britain and the Netherlands in the early 1900s, and Sweden in the 1930s” (572). Specifically, the early twentieth century German and French gay scene had achieved openness to a great extent – not quite different from the 1970s American one – with “[g]ay bars, restaurants, baths, dance clubs, drag balls, cafes, and publications” (572). What was missing though was the intrinsic factor discussed above: the politicization of gay minority and a powerful dialectic for equal rights. The mid-century European War condition probably redirected attention away from the homosexual subject matter. Nonetheless, “[b]y the early 1970s, after a decade of growing international political protest movements, including the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in New York,” according to Nardi, “gay liberation groups appeared, *inter*

³ Information obtained from *Washington Post*, 1996 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/perfectenemies.htm>

alia, in Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Mexico, Argentina, and Italy” (573, italics in text). Despite global politicization even in the pre-Stonewall years, what came to be remembered and celebrated is the Stonewall event per se due to being radical and pivotal in a long culminating process of political revolt. As a result, Stonewall eventually encapsulated the duality of collectiveness and visibility that other rebellions failed to achieve. Considering all the above, it becomes apparent that Stonewall resides in the heart of LGBT history and this is the reason why it is remembered and celebrated.

What is commemorated corresponds to a mystified practice shared by a unified community. LGBT Pride venerates the Stonewall riots not only as a watershed moment in their history, but rather as the starting point of a world where gay individuals are visible. The first Pride rally took place in New York City in 1970 on the same day the Stonewall incident had come about a year earlier. “Thousands of young men and women homosexuals from all over the Northeast marched from Greenwich Village to the Sheep Meadow in Central Park yesterday, proclaiming ‘the new strength and pride of the gay people,’” *The New York Times* stated on June 29, 1970.⁴ Ever since, Pride rallies occur worldwide, from Argentina to Greece and Shanghai to Johannesburg, every June. In their work *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Renger define traditions as practices “establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities” (9). Pride, as an invented tradition of the gay community, came to bear the same vital components that Stonewall materialized: collectivity and visibility. For that reason, its politics depend on the alignment of the private self with the public sphere in order to make the demand for equality audible. Hence, Pride entails simple yet powerful dialectics capable of evading cultural, racial or social borders and eventually capturing the gay psyche. Its global appeal and embrace signifies that the gay movement succeeded in creating a symbolic nation without physical frontiers where every individual shares common history, symbols and icons.

The borderless, symbolic gay nation can be thought of as an “imagined community.” In order to best conceptualize its structures, we need to invoke the theoretical work of Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Seeking to trace the character and effects of nationalism, Anderson initially attempted to define the essence of a nation. According to the writer, nation “is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign (15). First of all, “it is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (15, italics in text). Also, “the nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic borders, beyond which lie other nations” (16, italics in text). In addition, a nation “is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of

⁴ Information obtained from

<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F6oA15FD3E5D137B93CBAB178DD85F448785F9>

the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (16, italics in text). Last but not least, “it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (16, italics in text). Taking Anderson’s analytical framework into consideration will be helpful in order to envisage the configuration of the gay community.

Despite lacking frontiers, the gay community, to a great degree, corresponds – at least, symbolically – to Anderson’s definition of nation. First of all, it is imagined because, as has been made clear, there is no physical territory where LGBT people claim to be their country. There may be neighborhoods or even larger urban sites where gay lifestyle is more vibrant, but there is not an officially declared LGBT territory that equates its structures with those of an official state or country. Due to that reason, though, it cannot be claimed that the gay community is limited. Unless we call upon mathematical numbering and count every single individual, the global, borderless gay community may appear to be infinite. Sovereignty is also omitted due to the absence of a ruling regime. Nonetheless, it still is a community bound by comradeship and a common cause for sociopolitical acceptance. On top of that, the current politics of gay community promote the same model of history, which, as has been proved, marks Stonewall as the beginning.

Stonewall’s aura has been mystified in order to remind its community of its essentiality. Not quite different from nationalistic ideologies, the notion of Stonewall’s mystification not only reminds, but also fanaticizes. The dividing lines of what is really important and what has become essential appear thin under the veil of bonding people for a common end. Stonewall may be significant, but again what is disseminated – as Valocchi and Manalansan argued – is only a country’s version of events. In his inaugural address of 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama included Stonewall among three historically-charged territories – the other two being Seneca Falls, NY and Selma, AL – that signaled sociopolitical change on the American minoritarian milieu. Stonewall has been transformed into a metonymical site of reference for LGBT struggle for equality, just like Seneca Falls and Selma reflect the essence of women and African-American’s political struggle respectively. Obama stressed that:

“It is now our generation’s task to carry on what those pioneers began [...] Our journey is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law. For if we are truly created equal then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well”⁵

What has been delineated as America’s task to achieve equality has also been delineated for every nation that espouses these ideals. Thus, Stonewall has ultimately been deterritorialized from the American scene and has been reterritorialized in the universal discourses of gay community per se.

Before this argument sounds reductive, it is important to observe how the gay community pays homage to Stonewall. Within the annual practices of Pride, specific

⁵ Excerpt obtained from Barack Obama’s full inaugural speech as uploaded on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zncqb-n3zMo>

codes and symbols have been developed and are showcased in order to cite the historical past. For instance, the rainbow flag waves every June during the rallies all around the world. Designed by San Francisco artist Gilbert Baker in 1978, the flag was created to stand as a symbol of San Francisco's gay community and was then borrowed from gay groups globally. Recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers, the rainbow flag colors mirror diversity inside the LGBT community.⁶ Another version of events connects the rainbow flag with Hollywood starlet Judy Garland and her song "Over the Rainbow." Garland was found dead on June 22, 1969, and the funeral service was paid after five days – June 27 – in which approximately 20.000 people were present.⁷ David Higgs mentions that "[t]he 1939 MGM film *The Wizard of Oz*, starring a young Judy Garland, reverberated for post-war gay insiders" (173). "Garland became the most beloved camp idol to several post-war generations of homosexual men," Higgs maintains and concludes that "San Francisco became the land of Oz, the Technicolor world over the rainbow where gays would finally find a home" (173). Garland's eulogy, according to *The New York Times*, was serviced at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Home in New York City and her death came to be connected with the following night's events of Stonewall. Whether such claims are factual or not has not at all affected Garland's mystification as a gay icon and the fact that the rainbow flag was fashioned out of this iconicity.

Gay icons indeed hold a noteworthy place in the process of identity formation and thus their advocacy encloses all these elements that comprised LGBT history. The last few years, American music star Lady Gaga among others has taken a political stand in the LGBT fight for equal rights, both on American and international level. Apart from the gay elements evident in her artistic performances, Gaga has actively participated in Pride rallies and given speeches against social injustices regarding gender issues. In the 2011 Europride event held in Rome, Italy, Gaga delivered her speech in front of the gay protesters in which she stated:

"On the night of June 27, 1969, in the heart of my home, Manhattan's West Village, the gay rights movement was born. We stood together on that night the same as we are standing here today in solidarity for change [...] We have come so far from the days of Stonewall, but despite the political advances made in terms of our rights and visibility as LGBT people, sadly the truth and the fact is that homophobia and anti-gay violence and bullying are alive and real."⁸

Evidently, Gaga's reference to the Stonewall riots as the starting point of the gay movement relies on the coalescence of the American experience with the European and ultimately with the international one on the gay rights front. Gaga's inclusive plural "we" embraces LGBT audience of the past and the present – probably the future, as well – and instills the gay struggle a diachronic and, at the same time, a synchronic value. Moreover,

⁶ Information extracted from <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/afs/cs.cmu.edu/user/scotts/bulgarians/rainbow-flag.html>

⁷ Information obtained from *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/04/09/specials/garland-funeral.html?_r=5

⁸ Information obtained from Lady Gaga's Europride 2011 speech as uploaded on YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyB9qsRNjIM>

she immediately amplifies her argumentation by bringing forth Garland's authentic iconicity: "I am often questioned: 'Why so much gay speak?' I'm often questioned 'How gay are you Lady Gaga?'" and she proudly asserts: "On a gay scale of 1 to 10, I'm a Judy Garland fucking 42" (original emphasis). Therefore, today's gay community via the gay icons and their politics still try to establish a common history.

The diachronic/synchronic dualism of LGBT history is what ultimately achieves the creation of a global community. This global community, as has been argued, shares a common past that echoes in the established conventions and symbolic icons. However, the fact that there is an existing network of cultural exchange that transforms the smaller community units into one coherent community does not necessarily mean that a unified, universal gay identity has come into existence. In order to examine this parameter, we need to investigate the notion of globalization per se. In his work *Globalization and Culture*, John Tomlinson argues that globalization is the result deriving from the convergence of *connectivity* and *proximity* (3, my italics). The writer supports that "[l]ocal life' – contrasted here with the transient 'global life' [...] – is the vast order of human social existence which continues, because of its constraints of physical embodiment, to dominate even in a globalized world" and "occupies the majority of time and space" that we come to comprehend as "home" (9). Thus, under the shade of globalization, "connectivity means changing the nature of [these] localities" by "staying in one place but experiencing the 'dis-placement'" (9). In addition to that, following Tomlinson's premise, proximity has to be understood as the force that "comes from the networking of social relations across large tracts of time-space, causing distant events and powers to penetrate our local experience" (9). Considering all these premises, we can now revisit the main argument.

The gay community relies on the dis-placement of history from the confines of time and space in order to form the global identity. The Stonewall riots, therefore, are and are not part of America's history. No matter the region a gay individual comes from, Stonewall will always exist in close spatial and temporal proximity as a reminder of the symbolic gay past. Nevertheless, it still cannot be argued that a unified common identity has come in formation. The Stonewall events along with the practices and codes of Pride are indeed part of every gay identity, but not the nodal point. By extrapolation, a community and its culture may shape and be enclosed in an individual's psyche, yet they are not the single factors of identity formation. Furthermore, communities are not at all culturally stable due to their constantly being energized by the cultural collision with other communities. Thus, despite the promotion of a common sociopolitical past, the global gay community can be illustrated as nothing but diverse. For instance, whether or not Pride is considered to carry an American facet in its wholeness, it is ultimately celebrated differently in each corner of the globe, always absorbing cultural influences that every country injects into it. Even if social theorists detect the traces of American imperialism behind the movement's discourses, what should be kept is that a nation will always domesticate the dialectics of gay struggle depending its own political milieu and social structures. Specifically in the age of instant information and contact that our

generation experiences everything is made available, but the final choices are always made idiosyncratically.

In conclusion, the gay identity, whether to a large or minor degree, is only part of an individual's identity. Nevertheless, the gay community and its discourses exist as an external, universal sphere where symbols and codes connect historical past with present conditions. This sphere is made available for every gay individual to choose what best fits their needs and reflects their nature. Consequently, as we dive into the era of glocalization, the idea of "home" eventually resides in the choices we come to choose and domesticate from the abundance of socio-cultural stimuli. Since communities will be in relentless collision, cultural distinctiveness acquires a secondary position in the identity formation. As a result, it gives its place to a more egalitarian standard, which is individual distinctiveness. Individuals therefore become the mirror of their personal culture, a culture formulated from availabilities and choices. To that end, the politics of imperialism or homogenization behind the discourses of gay community should be viewed more as options rather than as threatening forces. Established LGBT traditions may invigorate memory and belonging for their groups, yet "home" is achieved with the power of choice to internalize these traditions.

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