

Gay populations as gentrifiers in Paris and Montreal

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Are “gay villages” a sign of gentrification? A comparison between the Marais in Paris – an area gentrified before becoming a gay neighbourhood – and the Village in Montreal – more gay than gentrified – reveals differences between gay communities,¹ as well as the relevance of a gender-based analysis of the city.²

From the 1980s onwards, research in the US and Canada highlighted the specific role of homosexual populations, essentially male, in the renovation and regeneration of central districts of certain North American cities (Castells & Murphy 1982; Knopp & Lauria 1985). These studies found relatively little resonance in France, and the involvement of gay populations in gentrification processes was for a long time clearly not of great interest to French sociologists and geographers. However, in recent years, this situation has changed and questions of gender and sex have become more visible within the social sciences in France, particularly among French geographers and urban sociologists (Blidon 2008; Leroy 2009). In this context, a study³ was undertaken into the role of gay populations in the gentrification of two neighbourhoods with quite different profiles, but which are nonetheless comparable: the Marais in Paris and the Gay Village (often known simply as “the Village”) in Montreal. Over a period of some 30 years, these two districts have become “gay neighbourhoods” and, at the same time, have seen their sociological profiles transformed (in the case of the Village) or further changed (in the case of the Marais). The initial questions at the heart of these studies were relatively simple to formulate, but complex to answer: do gay populations constitute a specific driving force for these changes in city-centre districts? Why is the adoption of a space by gay populations often accompanied by gentrification processes? What is this curious correlation based upon? And what have been the sociological mechanisms behind this phenomenon since the late 1970s?

Promotion of neighbourhoods by gay populations: new practices and new values

First of all, we need to describe and analyse the uniqueness of a “gaytrification” process, i.e. gentrification specifically involving gay populations. The role played by gay commerce in the rehabilitation of a neighbourhood and in the lifestyles of its residents would appear to be particularly important in this regard. Since the 1990s, gay commerce had been evolving to include new services and new consumption practices that closely correspond to the lifestyles, tastes and

1 See also: Éric Fassin, translated by Christina Mitrakos, “Homosexual City, Homophobic Banlieue?”, *Metropolitiques*, 9 March 2011. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Homosexual-City-Homophobic.html>.

2 See also: Sylvette Denèfle & Olivier Ratouis, “Le genre et la ville. Entretien avec Sylvette Denèfle” (in French), *Métropolitiques*, 8 December 2010. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Le-genre-et-la-ville.html>.

3 The field study made use of different empirical methods and materials: commercial and residential statistical data, press archives, biographical interviews with homosexual residents, and ethnographical observations in the two neighbourhoods concerned (the Marais in Paris and the Gay Village in Montreal).

consumption habits of gentrifiers as a whole (Giraud 2008; Lehman-Frisch 2002). Gay commerce is no longer limited to exclusively gay night-time establishments (such as bars and night clubs); little by little, this sector has expanded to include an ever wider variety of increasingly everyday services (e.g. pharmacies, bakeries, estate agents) and shops that take account of different needs (e.g. specialist bookshops, interior design businesses, hairdressing and beauty salons). The consumption practices associated with this sector thus reveal an emphasis culture, interior design, body care (maintenance and grooming) and fine food, for example, and reflect the convergence of certain tastes typical of gentrifiers in city-centre districts and certain gay “trends” in terms of consumption. Studies of the gay press also show that both neighbourhoods are the subject of an intense appreciation that uses terms and images very similar to those employed by gentrifiers with regard to the city (Authier 2008). In the 1980s, the perception of the Village was built on an attachment to the neighbourhood’s working-class past, reinforced by images combining conviviality with anti-establishmentism. In the Marais, although the district had already ceased (statistically and objectively) to be working-class, images of a working-class past were also mobilised in the 1980s, together with cultural and heritage attributes that celebrated an urban fabric in the process of being renovated. In the 1990s, the emphasis was above all on fashion, alternative trends and the “hip”, fun atmosphere of both neighbourhoods, through the promotion of lifestyles based around nights out, culture and urban innovation. Gay populations, through their commercial presence and their role in the development of these neighbourhoods’ images, actively participated in local gentrification.

“Gaytrification” and residential choice

The purely residential dimensions of the gaytrification process should also be highlighted. In particular, they show that, in the case of Paris, the Marais and the surrounding neighbourhoods were residential locations preferred by certain categories of gay populations, especially in the 1990s. The populations concerned were essentially individuals born in the 1960s from the middle and upper classes. Studies of the residential choices of a sample of Parisian gay men show that homosexual residential geography is indeed quite specific, and is focused principally on central districts of Paris, spreading gradually to other areas of the Right Bank, particularly in the east of Paris. In this regard, the Marais is prominent, but far from dominant: this homosexual residential geography seems to be explained more by the sociological characteristics of the areas preferred by respondents, rather than their proximity to a gay neighbourhood. In concrete terms, it is above all neighbourhoods that are central, that are home to many people in the intellectual and cultural professions⁴ and that are in the process of gentrification that appeal to gay men in Paris, rather than the concentration of gay shops and services or the symbolic status of the gay neighbourhood *per se*.⁵

The survey continues the analysis of links between gentrification and homosexuality at a microsociological scale, and of the backgrounds and lifestyles of gay men who have moved to the Marais and the Village since the late 1970s.⁶ Studying housing practices helps to understand the way in which gay men contribute to gentrification in practice, and shows that the specificities of their family and residential agendas can help transform housing stock and influence the way the urban fabric evolves. This capacity is particularly pronounced and sustainable among gay men who are homeowners: this is the case of a number of respondents, some of whom purchased in their respective neighbourhoods early on, while others arrived more recently (but with very significant financial resources). For these gay residents, living alone and/or without children enables them to

4 In particular, the professions and socioprofessional categories that INSEE (the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies) classifies as “PCS 35” or “Information, arts and entertainment professions”.

5 For more details, see: Giraud, C. 2011. “Enquête sur les lieux de résidence des homosexuels masculins à Paris”, *Sociétés Contemporaines*, no. 81, pp. 151-176.

6 We interviewed around 50 gay men who had lived in the Village or the Marais. These individuals, aged between 25 and 62 and a mixture of single men and couples, belong to different components of the middle and upper classes – an unsurprising profile in view of the profiles of the two neighbourhoods in question.

undertake unique interior design and architectural projects that result in homes that are poorly adapted to family life with children, with large communal spaces and a limited number of bedrooms. As gay men are more likely to live alone and/or without children, the link between homosexual lifestyles and gentrification may be present at a very fine scale, namely that of individual households and homes. Similarly, single life and the absence of children clearly seems to encourage many of these respondents to adopt what some of them call a “going-out culture” where a great deal of time is spent socialising in the neighbourhood, eating out and frequenting bars or clubs (including on weekdays) in the neighbourhood and in an unplanned way. However, these activities and lifestyles are not necessarily focused on gay shops or venues: some prefer them, others much less so. Again, the respondents may be gay, but they are also – indeed, above all – young working men who are members of small households with significant disposable income that is not distributed in quite the same way as for members of other households with equivalent social characteristics.

Finally, the study of neighbourly relations shows that neighbourhood sociability is characterised not so much by a desire to be among other gay men as by a more traditional social homogeneity. Respondents live alongside households that are similar to their own but not necessarily gay. Often, their neighbours will be other gentrifiers, young couples without children, single people and members of intellectual professions (design, media, culture, etc.). Participation in such sociabilities also refers to the socially constructed ability of their neighbours to appreciate the presence of gay men in their apartment building or district. In this regard, the gentrified environment of the neighbourhood also attracts certain gay households (Giraud 2011).

From Paris to Montreal: differentiated development

These selected results should not, however, mask the diversity of the populations encountered in the survey: although they may appear sociologically similar, a detailed examination of respondents’ backgrounds and interviews shows that they have followed quite diverse personal, social and residential paths. Generation gaps, differences in social background and considerable variety in the way respondents live and experience their own homosexuality have significant effects on their relationship with their neighbourhood. As a result, not all those who have lived in the Marais or the Village have played an equally active, intensive or long-term roles in local transformations. This comparative analysis also reveals distinct configurations on either side of the Atlantic. On the one hand, there is a “Parisian model” where an older, earlier and more intensive form of gentrification has been *accompanied* by gay populations who cannot really be said to be pioneers. At the same time, the gay district of Paris bears little resemblance to the North American community-based model: the gay presence in the Marais has been largely subsumed into a space where there is a great deal of “competition” from other populations and commercial sectors. Furthermore, in spatial terms, the gay neighbourhood is limited to a few streets in the 4th *arrondissement* (which covers the south of the Marais). Although certain streets and café terraces are clearly identifiable as gay, the area has not been gentrified by homosexual populations alone, who moved into the district once the gentrification process (begun in the 1960s) was already under way.

In Montreal, the gentrification of the Centre-Sud neighbourhood took place later and, above all, took a very different form from that seen in Paris, namely that of “marginal” gentrification (Germain & Rose 2000). This produced a more mixed and more diverse sociological and cultural environment than the Marais. Above all, this form of gentrification was driven to a much greater extent by the gay population, who were pioneers and key players of urban renewal here. Since the early 1980s, the “birth” of the Village has paved the way for forms of gay presence that are much more assertive, institutionalised and community-based than in Paris, which, to a certain extent, can be explained by the specific context of Montreal and Quebec: urban zoning is much more pronounced in Montreal than in Paris and the idea of “community” seems to be less devalued in Quebec society. There, “community” is seen as a social resource that provides assistance,

relationships and services that meet one's specific needs; French debates on the dangers of "communitarianism" are far from view. These contextual variations can be summarised schematically: the Marais is without doubt a gentrified neighbourhood first and foremost, and secondarily a gay neighbourhood, whereas the Village is quite clearly more a gay neighbourhood than a gentrified district. The comparison described here highlights the diverse ways in which homosexuality can have a spatial impact in urban environments via the specific case of gay neighbourhoods. Further studies need to be made of this diversity, especially in other types of spaces (periurban and rural areas in particular) and with regard to other forms of homosexual population, particularly lesbian populations, which even today are the subject of very little research in French sociology.

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