



**Sylvie Tissot**

# Gayfriendly

Acceptance  
and Control of  
Homosexuality  
in New York  
and Paris



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Homosexuality in New York and Paris

Sylvie Tissot

Translated by Helen Morrison

polity

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# INTRODUCTION

Late 2012: in France, hundreds of thousands of people were protesting against the draft bill to legalize same-sex marriage which would finally be approved in 2013. I was in New York at that time, where this movement, known as '*La manif pour tous*' ('Protest for all'),<sup>1</sup> was viewed with an astonishment that tarnished American perceptions of France's reputation for sexual progressiveness. In the course of my research, I encountered many Brooklyn residents, such as Isabelle, a 38-year-old lesbian, French like myself, but settled in New York on a permanent basis. She was living in the southern part of Park Slope, an area still in the process of gentrification, where she and her wife had bought an apartment. When I asked her if she had ever found herself on the receiving end of insults, or violence, she replied:

No. Never in New York. In fact, the only time it happened was when some people were making fun of us – 'Ah, the two lesbians at the next table' – and they were French people in a restaurant! I didn't say anything, although I could have said 'Look, I can understand what you're saying.' It wasn't very nice. They weren't saying anything really bad, but when people are making fun of you and you're right next to them, it's not very pleasant. But that's the only time it's ever happened. Here it's more a matter of complete indifference.

Her reply could have brought an abrupt end to the question which this book sets out to explore: is acceptance of homosexuality more advanced in Paris or in New York? The everyday acceptance which prevails in the famous American city, the rights which have been successfully won and, even more, the enthusiastic celebration of a certain gayfriendliness contrast not only with the reactionary movement of the *Manif pour tous* in 2012–13 but also with the fact that, in France,

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the cause of gays and lesbians is associated with more reservations, less enthusiasm and a lower level of institutionalization. Yet, in their own way, Parisians are also gayfriendly and are undoubtedly becoming ever more so, as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that, on the initiative of the city's mayor, rainbows were painted on the pavements of some streets in the gay district of the Marais. Indeed, in both cities, on an institutional level and among many of the residents, there is a condemnation of homophobia which seems to mark the end of decades of stigmatization, hatred and persecution. Rather than establishing winners and losers, in this book I set another objective – that of understanding the individual journeys each country has undertaken in order to achieve this social progress by focusing on what are essentially two different ways of being tolerant. I am not, however, simply proposing a comparison. My research aims to explore the profound ambiguity of this progress, which it seems is no sooner celebrated than immediately challenged. Indeed, as early as the 1990s, when demands relating to marriage, family or joining the army were first beginning to be voiced, certain writers had pointed out the pernicious effect of these victories. Using terms such as 'normalization' or 'homonormativity',<sup>2</sup> a barrage of criticism targeted the changes in gay lifestyles and the end of the subversiveness previously associated with them. Gone were radical protests against society, in conjunction with black, feminist or anti-capitalist movements. Relegated to invisibility, from then onwards, were the places where people could meet up for recreational sex and alternative forms of sociability. Instead, mainstream organizations, supported by affluent white gays, thanks to the efforts of large-scale fundraising operations, were demanding social integration through access to marriage and family life,<sup>3</sup> and large-scale campaigns, referred to as 'homonationalism' or 'pinkwashing', were reclaiming the LGBT cause for commercial or imperialistic ends.<sup>4</sup>

In comparison with these studies, my ambition was twofold and, as will become evident, necessitated a sociological investigation. My first objective was to understand the exact nature of a social progress which, as is often the case (take the achievements of the civil rights movements or indeed of feminism), is not a linear phenomenon. It cannot be described simply in terms of a shift from intolerance to tolerance, from hatred to acceptance, but rather as a process in which new boundaries are mapped out. In its wake come new rights and, at the same time, new constraints. Considerable advances have certainly been made in the legal approach to homosexuality. In 1981, France rejected the World Health Organization's definition of homosexuality

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as a mental disorder. Repression had officially ended, and the last documents discriminating against homosexuals had been scrapped. In the USA, a similar process occurred, although it was not until 2013 that the Supreme Court declared as anti-constitutional the so-called anti-sodomy laws still in force in fourteen states. In both countries, the battle against various forms of discrimination had taken over from the fight against criminalization, and, until it was eventually legalized, same-sex marriage was a high-profile legal and political issue. In France, the law on the *Pacs* (*Pacte civil de solidarité*)<sup>5</sup> in 1999 paved the way for the recognition, in 2013, of the right to marry and adopt children. On the other side of the Atlantic, where same-sex marriage had been recognized by several states since 2003, the Supreme Court declared in 2015 that any attempt to forbid such unions was anti-constitutional.

If then, in spite of this progress, the era of equality has still failed to arrive, could it be because a certain resistance persists at the heart of public opinion? In reality, public perception has evolved in parallel with legal changes, as numerous surveys and investigations indicate.<sup>6</sup> In Paris and in New York (but the same could also be said of many other cities), rejection of homosexuality seems even to be considered an outlawed attitude, relegated to ancient history. In the districts of the Marais and Park Slope where I carried out my research, the presence of gays and lesbians among the friends, colleagues and neighbours of heterosexual residents had become commonplace, and support for same-sex marriage was often self-evident and even enthusiastic. In short, these heterosexuals were (and often declared themselves to be) gayfriendly. This gayfriendliness nevertheless brings with it considerable ambiguity, as is evident from the comments of some of the residents I encountered, in spite of the fact that all of them were adamant in their rejection of homophobia. Take, for example, the case of a Parisian man, formerly an enthusiastic connoisseur and client of the bars in the Marais, who voiced his support for same-sex marriage (though at the same time describing the institution as ‘outdated’ and ‘tacky’) but then expressed reservations about same-sex parenting, a view shared by his partner, who stressed the idea of a necessary ‘difference’. Or a woman from New York who had made a donation to the campaign for same-sex marriage and expressed her delight about living in an area where the schools her son might attend were ‘gayfriendly’, but who nevertheless mentioned that her lesbian friends, of whom she had many, all living as couples, did not adopt a ‘stereotyped’ look (such as short hair). The comments made by these two interviewees, both of whom we shall encounter at a

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later stage, indicate two things. Firstly, they reveal the existence of two national models, based on different combinations of the elements defining respectability (marriage, sexuality, family, etc.). Secondly, as is apparent, there are multiple criteria associated with gayfriendliness, and the attitudes involved are not always coherent. Rather than defining the exact nature of gayfriendliness and casting light on any divergencies from such an ideal, I have instead set myself the goal of demonstrating how acceptance and distancing can coexist within the same person and how a particular neighbourhood can be inclusive while still excluding certain groups or individuals. What exactly are the constituents of this new and, in some respects, surprising attitude, which no sooner seems to eliminate rejection than it imposes a new set of distances? Readers will have to decide whether the transformations it has generated are welcome or disappointing, whether they should be celebrated or deplored. And those heterosexuals who consider themselves tolerant, and are determined to be so, might perhaps find some food for thought in all of this.

I am referring to heterosexuals here because, as well as setting out to analyse a new and intriguing approach, the second goal of this book is to demonstrate that, as a result of these new attitudes, not only has the place of homosexuality in contemporary societies changed but heterosexuality too is in the process of being reconfigured. A historic change has in fact taken place, and heterosexuals have changed as a result of the emergence of gay and lesbian movements. It is not simply that they have become more tolerant but, rather, that they are heterosexuals in a different way, the result of giving up some of their privileges (exclusive access to marriage and to family life) but also of claiming others (an insistence that gays and lesbians be 'respectable' and a cautious and controlled promotion of sexual tolerance). If interviews with gays and lesbians are included in this research, the originality of this book is that it focuses attention on heterosexuals and examines the new place homosexuality now occupies, not only in their opinions but also in their own biographies, in their relationships as professionals, friends and neighbours, in their public and private, social and intimate life. Heterosexuals are, of course, by no means neglected in social science research – in reality they are even omnipresent – but they are rarely studied in their own right.<sup>7</sup> Where homosexuality, whether regarded as a pathological condition or not, is constantly examined and scrutinized, heterosexuality seems rather to be taken for granted. In contrast to this perception, a number of studies have tried to measure and describe the wider acceptance of homosexuality;<sup>8</sup> others, also recent, have focused on

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heterosexuality itself. Several years after Monique Wittig called for an investigation into the ‘political regime’ of heterosexuality,<sup>9</sup> Jane Ward,<sup>10</sup> for example, turned her attention to a heterosexual culture which was structured by masculine violence, but which also revealed contradictions, surprises and, as she hopes in her role of sympathetic ally, potential for emancipation. It is along the same lines as certain critical studies on heterosexuality,<sup>11</sup> and with the same determination to switch perspective from the dominated to the dominant, that I intend to offer my contribution. It is important to point out here that bi and trans people are not absent from this book. The question as to whether gayfriendliness has, over the course of the last few years, been transformed into LGBT-friendliness is one which deserves to be addressed. Nevertheless, I maintain that this new heteronormativity has been shaped primarily as a result of a certain relationship with gays and lesbians.

As a sociologist specializing in urban environments, I have chosen to conduct my research by carrying out a field study, extending over a period of several years, in two areas of Paris and New York. I interviewed ninety-five people, two-thirds of whom were heterosexual (I will return to the exact terms of the investigation at a later stage), some of whom I also socialized with informally by frequenting certain cafés and shops, local groups and food cooperatives, churches and synagogues. This approach enabled me to penetrate below the surface of what was said and, by partially integrating their social circle, to expose the norms generated and passed on in various local institutions. Conducting the investigation within prescribed areas produced rich results, making it possible to understand how, where, when and on what basis relationships develop between people of different sexual orientations – whether neighbours, parents with children at the same school or clients in a café. Beyond a rainbow flag and staunch support for same-sex marriage, how does the much vaunted gayfriendliness manifest itself in concrete terms? Only a field study would be capable of bringing substantiated answers to this question.

As a result, I was able to identify two main outcomes which I shall outline briefly here, allowing readers to explore them in more detail in the pages that follow. First of all, as other studies have shown, far from the ‘fantasy of completion’,<sup>12</sup> gayfriendliness brings in its wake powerful injunctions, strong reservations, implicit demands – the very word ‘tolerance’ indicates that what is tolerated remains problematic.<sup>13</sup> However, the *quid pro quo* of progressivism cannot simply be reduced to an ‘assimilation’ or a ‘normalization’. In other words, heterosexuals do not expect gays and lesbians to resemble them, or at

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least that is not all they expect. Of course, the fact of being surrounded by people 'like them' (couples who want to get married, for example) is a powerful motive for acceptance. But this acceptance – and here lies one of its ambiguities – is also rooted, just as conclusively, in the subtle and measured appreciation of difference. Otherness itself is positive when it is an element of a valued 'diversity', for yourself and your children, and of a rich sociability, or when it is a characteristic of a 'cool' district, but on condition that this otherness is an acceptable one. In the Marais and Park Slope districts, gays and lesbians must be respectable, which does not mean they must be *like* heterosexuals. They must be normal, but not completely so, similar but still different, in order to meet the strategic, and not always conscious requirements for empathy with homosexuality. More than heteronormativity, a control is exerted over the exact way of being gay, and this can vary enormously – another indication of this power – depending on the time, the place or on those involved.

If power relations manifest themselves more by the exertion of a control over difference than by an insistence on resemblance, and if, in spite of undeniable progress, they remain brutal, it is for a reason which reflects the other major outcome of this investigation: gayfriendliness, in the striking forms it has assumed today, originates from the top of the social hierarchy and from within a very specific circle which can be explored by focusing on the Marais and on Park Slope. It is a social environment composed of wealthy residents, rich in cultural capital, who value and actively encourage diversity.<sup>14</sup> There are no conscious strategies, but there are powerful interests, which are indeed just as much moral as economic. And it is in the heart of previously gay districts which, with the gradual advance of gentrification, have shaken off their marginal or alternative status that a certain way of associating with and of valuing gays and lesbians has evolved: hence the perhaps surprising choice of an investigation which focuses not on the places where homophobia is particularly rife but, rather, on those where residents openly, and sometimes with considerable energy, cultivate tolerance.

A century ago, sexual relationships between men were confined to very different spaces and associated with various illicit locations, such as those in certain poorer districts of New York, studied by George Chauncey.<sup>15</sup> Today, the change has come from the professional classes, which, of course, does not mean that other social classes are less tolerant but simply that they are tolerant in different ways. This class issue is a crucial one. First of all, it explains why this way of being tolerant has imposed itself on the public space, to the detriment



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of forms of acceptance which exist in other social groups and which remain largely invisible. In fact, alongside this gayfriendliness comes the notion that, today, the most tolerant people are to be found in the most highly educated social groups. In reality, this notion reflects their own perception of themselves, an attitude which currently attracts a broad consensus and which I challenge in this book. Returning to the place of gays and lesbians today, the issue of social class manifests itself in a very different way. It is indeed a crucial one, given the extent to which it shapes this particular mode of tolerance by insisting that gays and lesbians conform to certain demands: a social respectability based on the separation between public and private life (and the relegation of sexuality to the private sphere), a detailed consensus on the places and the moments where homosexuality can be visible, and even desirable, the integral role played by homosexuality in the definition of good taste and cultural distinction,<sup>16</sup> a strict control over the (correct) way of behaving, and the exclusion of anything which might appear vulgar. As we shall see, these demands weigh heavily not only on gays and lesbians but also on heterosexuals, who, in their role as gayfriendly citizens, are required to be ‘good’ people and respectable neighbours, keeping a firm check on ‘others’ but also on themselves, and maintaining a close watch on their own behaviour and language, choosing their friends and their children’s school with care.

### Why Park Slope and the Marais?

In order to study the characteristics of gayfriendliness and the lifestyle with which it is associated, I conducted my research in the heart of two districts where heterosexuals cohabit alongside a gay population which has been visibly present since the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> This coexistence takes different forms in New York and in Paris. In the Marais, the visible gay presence is largely a male one and is concentrated on a few streets in the fourth *arrondissement* and, in particular, in bars which attract a sometimes exclusively gay population. In Park Slope, on the other side of the Atlantic, lesbians are often to be seen in couples, though their presence in the public space is less obvious. In contrast to the historical centre of Paris, with its narrow streets frequented by tourists, the district of Brooklyn, with its wide roads and extensive park (Prospect Park), is now home to gentrifiers who have moved there from Manhattan with their children. On one side of the Atlantic there is the fourth *arrondissement*, known as much as a ‘historical district’ or ‘Jewish quarter’ as a ‘gay’ area, and now included in a

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'Marais' which takes in part of the bourgeois third *arrondissement*. On the other side, there is the area gradually extending towards South Brooklyn as the process of gentrification advances, a district favoured by heterosexual and homosexual families, as opposed to the better-known gay areas of New York that are situated in Manhattan. If the choice of the Marais, unique in France, was an obvious one, that of Park Slope might seem more surprising, given the proliferation in New York of districts which could legitimately lay claim to a 'gay' label, such as the Village or Chelsea, and which might compare more easily with the Marais. Apart from the fact that I was determined to resist an excessive focus on male gay areas, Park Slope provides an opportunity to see, more clearly than anywhere else, a gayfriendliness which is part of the prevailing values of residents who are as proud of their wealth and their family-based lifestyle as of their progressive values.

In fact, in these gentrified districts, one group now 'sets the tone', and this group has similar characteristics in both cities. These residents are predominantly white, are university graduates and come from a socio-economic level which situates them firmly within the middle and upper classes. Their residential history led them to move into a district which was either still working class, in the case of the older residents, or else in the process of gentrification, post-1990. It was at this point that many of them became homeowners for the first time. The socio-demographic reality, as recorded in the census data from both countries, confirms the considerable influence potentially exerted by this group.<sup>18</sup> Operating just outside the most bourgeois districts<sup>19</sup> and openly sharing certain progressive values, the heterosexual gentrifiers of the Marais and of Park Slope form a relatively united and committed group, and it is this group that forms the focus of this sociological scrutiny.

The similarity in terms of profile justifies the choice of sites, both of which have undergone substantial gentrification. True, the brownstones – those nineteenth-century town houses – of Park Slope have little in common with the seventeenth-century mansions standing shoulder to shoulder with the Hausmann architecture in the Marais. The wide streets of Park Slope, typical of the checkerboard layout of major American cities, contrast with the dense network of narrow streets in the historical centre of the French capital.<sup>20</sup> Prospect Park, which adjoins Park Slope, provides additional space for the local residents, in contrast with the densely constructed Marais. There are, however, a great many similarities. In both cases, gentrifiers describe the local architecture as 'ancient' or 'historic'. And this symbolic

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rehabilitation brings with it another phenomenon common to both districts, which is the meticulous and virtually complete renovation of the building stock, a process which, for several decades now, has been the sign of a ‘super-gentrification’.<sup>21</sup> Since the town planning of the two cities does not allow for space to be occupied in the same way, each district has its own forms of gayfriendly sociability. But, ultimately, what dominates in these areas are the places enjoyed by gentrifiers from all sexual orientations, and in particular the restaurants where organic food is a must, where the atmosphere is ‘cool’ and the prices very high, where a certain bohemian spirit – or at least what claims to be so – sits alongside powerful forces of distinction.

For the purposes of this research, thirty-nine people were interviewed in France and fifty-six in the USA, during a period extending from 2011 to 2016. Of the ninety-five people interviewed, fifty-eight were heterosexual and thirty-seven were gay and lesbian, self-identified as such.<sup>22</sup> Some personal connections enabled me to initiate the research in both countries, using an initial criterion to the effect that those involved should live in the chosen areas, broadly defined as the third and fourth *arrondissements* in the case of Paris and Park Slope in New York, extending as far as the streets situated to the south of what is now generally called South Slope, where Isabelle lived. I also interviewed a few people living in neighbouring areas that had been similarly gentrified, sometimes more recently. These included areas such as ‘Arts et Métiers’ in the third *arrondissement* or the tenth *arrondissement* near the place de la République in Paris and Prospect Heights and Carroll Gardens in Brooklyn. In order to avoid the effects of social proximity, efforts were made to vary the profile of participants in terms of age, gender and area of activity, but with a focus on gentrifiers from the middle and, in particular, the upper classes. A determination to reconstitute local networks and interpersonal links led me to systematically invite those interviewed to introduce me to their friends and neighbours. Finally, over the course of five one-month stays between 2011 and 2015 and a six-month stay in New York in 2012–13, I carried out a series of observations of a more ethnographic type, for example in the famous food coop or the Park Slope Methodist church.

Most of the interviews were conducted in the homes of those involved, and, in the case of heterosexual couples, care was taken to avoid the joint presence of both partners on the basis that this is not always conducive to discussions about gender norms and sexual experiences. The welcome I was given – and I shall come back to this at a later stage – varied considerably, depending on whether I was

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interviewing a man or a woman. I often requested a second interview and sometimes managed to stay in touch with the interviewees, though with limited success, for, while those interviewed took a certain pleasure in demonstrating their open-mindedness for more than an hour at a time, and while, in general, they appreciated the chance to discuss current issues and to express their opinion of the two countries (sometimes drawing on periods of time spent abroad), the possibility of being interviewed again, having responded (or not, as we shall see later) to the most intimate questions, touching on sexuality for example, put them somewhat on their guard. In the course of the interviews, I elicited participants' opinions on homosexuality by asking a number of different questions, on issues such as same-sex marriage, for example. I also, and in particular, attempted to retrace 'gayfriendly trajectories', marked by contacts with homosexuality (a conversation with parents during childhood, a high-school friend coming out, an influential media personality, etc.) and in the context of family, matrimonial, professional or even sexual experience. It was at times a difficult process. While almost certainly glossing over certain thorny episodes from their own past, those interviewed also gave voice to their doubts, in particular regarding children. It was indeed in precisely this context, when I asked them about the possibility that their own children might be gay, bi or trans (or might one day become so) that the most deep-seated reservations were expressed. Let me therefore thank my interviewees not only for giving me their time but also for sharing some of the intimacies of their private lives and, in so doing, revealing the contradictions which also form the subject of this book. For, if being gayfriendly is often taken for granted, it is also the result of a long journey, as we shall see in the first chapter.