



French Gay Liberation Movement

by Tina Gianoulis

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French gay liberation was born during the early 1970s on the foundation of a courageous, if conservative, homophile movement and the thrust of a massive wave of social activism.

The two forces met quite publicly in what some consider to be the actual moment that began the radical gay liberation movement in France on March 10, 1971. That day, lesbian and gay activists disrupted a liberal radio talk show broadcast to forcibly demand the visibility and rights that queers had barely dared plead for before.

The action of these radicals, who had been influenced both by the May 1968 student riots that rocked France and by the Stonewall Riots of June 1969 in New York City, led to the formation of several radical national groups that tied gay rights to other social causes and sought, not tolerance, but revolutionary social change.

Though French culture has traditionally been fairly permissive in the area of personal sexual relationships, homosexuality has often been treated as a vice. Sexual relations between persons of the same sex were decriminalized in the late eighteenth century, but queers continued to be harassed and prosecuted under moralistic decency laws, especially for any public manifestation of homosexuality.

During the Nazi occupation of World War II, the collaborationist French government passed the Ordinance of August 6, 1942, which criminalized same-sex relations with those under 21; and after the war, Charles DeGaulle's government continued to prosecute gays under similar statutes. The 1960 Mirguet Amendment equated homosexuality with other "scourges of society" such as tuberculosis and alcoholism, and continued to punish gays for "public indecency." Under the authority of this amendment, penalties for homosexual public sex were greatly increased as compared with those for heterosexual public sex.

In 1954, André Baudry, a gay teacher and writer, sought to end the conflation of homosexual love with vice and immorality. In an effort to change the public perception of homosexuality, as well as provide a safe place for gays to meet and socialize, Baudry founded the *Club Littéraire et Scientifique de Pays Latins* (Literary and Scientific Club of the Latin Countries).

CLESPALA, also called *Arcadie*, the name of its monthly review, had fairly conservative goals, discreetly defining itself as homophile rather than homosexual, and encouraging queers to live conventional, respectable lives in order to avoid social condemnation.

For many years the only gay political organization in France, *Arcadie* organized dances, lectures, and other social and educational events. The group had hundreds of thousands of members, almost all men, and sold tens of thousands of copies of its journal each month. It continued to function until 1982, though after the advent of gay liberation in 1970, the organization rapidly became irrelevant.

In 1970, two years after a series of massive strikes and demonstrations of students and workers during May

1968 had ignited a fervor for revolutionary change in all aspects of French society, a group of emerging feminists approached *Arcadie* about setting up a women's group within the organization. *Arcadie's* leaders rejected their proposal as too political. By the following year, feminist women were no longer asking permission to be included.

On March 10, 1971, a popular radio talk show featured a program with the intensely liberal title, "Homosexuality, This Painful Problem." As a panel that included André Baudry, a priest, a psychiatrist, and gay journalist Pierre Hahn, gingerly discussed the "problem" of gayness, a group of radical queers, mostly lesbians, secretly encouraged by Hahn, stormed the stage yelling pro-gay slogans and ending the broadcast.

With this dramatic demonstration, radical gays and lesbians quite literally "took the stage" of the gay liberation movement with what journalist Jean Le Bitoux called, "The ripening of shame into anger."

A new national group, *Le Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire* (The Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action-FHAR) embodied the change in gay politics. FHAR called for the destruction of "fascist sexual normality" in two manifestos in the radical newspaper *Tout! (Everything!)*, one titled, "Address to Those Who are Like Us," and the other called, "Address to Those Who Think Themselves 'Normal.'"

Hundreds of leftist gays began attending FHAR meetings, and it was not long before the group began to fragment. Transvestite and transgender men formed an anarchistic offshoot called *Les Gazolines* who disrupted meetings with demonstrations of bawdy humor, and other working groups produced journals such as *L'antinorm* and *Le fléau social (The Social Scourge)*.

Many radical lesbians, such as Marie-Jo Bonnet and Anne-Marie Grélois, disgusted by the sexism and lesbian invisibility within FHAR, left to form a women's group, *Gouines Rouges* (Red Dykes), named for a homophobic epithet hurled at members during a demonstration. Many members of *Gouines Rouges* had close ties to the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (Women's Liberation Movement), and some, like novelist and literary theorist Monique Wittig, became icons of international lesbian feminism.

Among other significant leaders and theorists who emerged from the French gay liberation movement were young militants such as Alain Prique, Jean Le Bitoux, and Guy Hocquenghem, as well as older radicals such as Daniel Guérin, Michel Foucault, Geneviève Pastré, and Jean-Paul Aron.

By the late 1970s, revolutionary gay politics began to give way to a drive for legislative reform. In 1979 the *Comité d'Urgence Anti-Répression Homosexuelle* (Emergency Committee Against Homosexual Repression), a non-governmental organization that worked to improve the legal status of French queers, was founded.

The reformers soon met with success in their efforts to repeal the two statutes in French law that discriminated against homosexual citizens: different ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual acts; and different penalties for homosexual and heterosexual public sex.

As in other countries, the gay movement in France was devastated by the arrival of a new and terrifying sexually transmitted disease. The 1984 death of famous French philosopher Michel Foucault from AIDS riveted the attention of the gay community on the epidemic and prompted dramatic changes in the politics of sexual liberation.

Radical action returned to the French queer community during the 1990s with the rise of confrontational groups like ACT-UP that demanded a pro-active response to the AIDS crisis.

But in general more recent glbtq activists have been more reformist than revolutionary, succeeding in 1999 to pass the *Pacte Civil de Solidarité* (Civil Solidarity Pact), which removed legal distinctions between

married and unmarried couples regardless of gender, effectively granting same-sex couples the same civil and economic rights as opposite-sex couples (though not the name *marriage*).

Still, the influence of the French gay liberation movement remains potent. The 1970s spirit of viewing homosexuality as a revolutionary force for change may be seen in some contemporary organizations, such as the *Association pour le reconnaissance des droits des personnes homosexuelles et transexuelles à l'immigration et au séjour* (Association for the Recognition of the Rights of Homosexual and Transsexual People for Immigration and Residency).

ARDHIS was formed in 1998 by a coalition of queers who found commonality in the prominent social issues of gay marriage and the rights of bi-national glbtq couples and persecuted glbtq individuals seeking refuge in France.

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