



Paris

by Brett Farmer

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One of the world's most iconic cities and an influential hub of Western culture, Paris is also a major international glbtq center. Its popular Anglophone nickname, "gay Paree," was coined originally in response to the city's fabled notoriety for hedonism and frivolity, but it could as easily refer to its equal reputation for other kinds of "gayness."

Early History

As France's capital and most populous city, Paris has long been a natural draw for those seeking to escape the traditional conservatism of provincial France. Michael D. Sibalís notes that Paris's reputation as a focus for queer life in France dates back as far as the Middle Ages, citing as evidence among other things a twelfth-century poet's description of the city as reveling in "the vice of Sodom."

Medieval Paris was not exactly a queer paradise, however. Throughout the Middle Ages numerous poor Parisians were regularly convicted and, in some instances, executed for engaging in sodomy and other same-sex activities.

Things improved somewhat by the early modern period. While their exact correspondence to contemporary categories of glbtq sexuality is open to debate, well-developed sodomitical subcultures had emerged in Paris by the eighteenth century. Some historians, such as Maurice Lever, claim these subcultures formed a "homosexual world . . . with its own language, rules, codes, rivalries and clans."

Because of the comparative under-representation of women in records of the time, documentary evidence of female same-sex activity in early modern Paris is scant. There is suggestion, however, that homoerotic liaisons were common among aristocratic women of the time, and proto-lesbian or "tribade" subcultures developed in the eighteenth century among the city's female prostitutes.

The French Revolution and subsequent decriminalization of sodomy set the conditions for increasingly robust queer cultures in Paris. In accordance with the prevailing ideology of liberal individualism and the social and legal separation in post-Revolutionary France between private and public life, these cultures were tolerated largely on the condition they remain private and discreet.

La belle époque

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a high point in both the general and queer cultural life of Paris. An era of booming economic expansion, the so-called *belle époque* saw Paris emerge as a global center of the new modernity, celebrated for its technological and cultural innovations and characterized by a hedonistic spirit of social and erotic bohemianism.

In its newfound status as the pleasure-capital of the Western world, Paris became a thriving center for



Openly gay Paris mayor Bertrand Delanoë in front of the Louvre Museum in 2006.
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same-sex sexual cultures. Though still relatively underground, a network of venues--salons, bars, cafés, and bathhouses--catering variously to homosexual men and women emerged throughout Paris, particularly around the areas of Montmartre and Les Halles.

Lesbianism experienced a particular surge of visibility and popularity through this period. Fueled by first-wave feminism and the increasing social freedoms permitted women, as well as by the popularization--some might say, sensationalist exploitation--of female homosexuality in French decadent and bohemian cultures, Paris of the *belle époque* become what Catherine van Casselear terms "the undisputed capital of world lesbianism."

It would be wrong to think these fin-de-siècle manifestations of queer sexuality in Paris were wholly or unproblematically embraced. Conservative politicians and commentators of the time were vocal in their condemnation of Paris as the "new Babylon," and they frequently singled out the city's queer cultures as damning signs of its social degeneracy.

Twentieth-Century Paris

The competing play of liberalism and conservative backlash continued to mark the development of Parisian glbtq cultures throughout the twentieth century.

The inter-war years were another period of consolidated growth for Paris's homosexual subcultures. Though not as spectacularly visible as those of Weimar Berlin, the other major European center of glbtq life of the time, Paris of the 1920s and 1930s offered a range of venues and social pleasures for gay men, lesbians, and their friends.

An emblematic event of this era for Parisian glbtq cultures was the annual Mardi Gras balls held at Magic-City dance hall on the Rue de l'Université. As Michael Sibalis relates, these balls attracted "thousands of [gay] men, most costumed and many in extravagant female drag." They were such prominent events that one newspaper journalist of the time rather grumpily opined, "all of Sodom's grandsons scattered throughout the world . . . seem to have rebuilt their accursed city for an evening."

The Nazi occupation of France and the installation of the puppet Vichy regime brought a sudden and tragic end to such freedoms. Queer venues closed and, for the first time in 150 years, homosexuality was made a criminal offense under French law, punishable with imprisonment or worse.

It is difficult to gauge how many Parisian homosexuals were incarcerated through this period but survivor accounts--such as the recently published memoirs of Pierre Seel, a gay man from provincial France interned in a concentration camp because of his homosexuality--paint a disturbing picture of a very dark period in French glbtq history.

With the end of World War II, life for queer Parisians certainly improved, but it remained under the pall of a persistently conservative national mood. In a fashion that paralleled the Cold War culture of homophobia elsewhere in the post-war West, homosexuality was redefined throughout this period as an insidious threat to national security and social stability. The right-wing government of Charles de Gaulle not only maintained the Vichy criminalization of homosexuality, but it also increased its range and penalties.

Motivated by the resurgence of leftist politics that gripped France in the late 1960s--culminating famously in "*les événements*," the student-led riots of May 1968--gay liberation groups such as FHAR (the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action) emerged throughout Paris in the 1960s and 1970s. Their efforts helped realize the eventual repeal of all anti-homosexual laws and the cultivation of a more permissive political and social attitude toward queer sexualities.

Queer Paris Today

Today, Paris has become a major world center of glbtq culture, with a rich and vibrant queer scene. In a departure from the more private and diffuse forms that previously typified queer life in the city, Paris has in recent years experienced a veritable explosion of glbtq visibility.

Gay and Lesbian Pride marches, for example, have been a feature of the city's queer scene since the late 1970s, but they were generally small-scale affairs that attracted crowds of little more than 10,000. Starting in the early 1990s, these marches became more celebratory and party-like in style with an exponential increase in attendance that today averages in excess of 500,000 people, making them among the most popular annual events in France.

In addition, a distinct gay "neighborhood" has developed in Paris around the district known as Le Marais. Like gay neighborhoods elsewhere around the Western world, Le Marais has a concentrated queer residential population and offers a wide range of commercial gay businesses from bars and cafes to bookstores and laundries, all of which fly the mandatory rainbow flag.

The rise of a concentrated and community-oriented glbtq culture in Paris is not without its critics. Many claim it is a style of queer organization that is not native to France and lament it as a symptom of what Laurent Dispot terms "the Americanization of European homosexuality."

Still, Paris continues to experience an extraordinary renaissance of glbtq visibility and pride. In 2001, the city elected its first openly gay mayor, Bertrand Delanoë. In a sure sign of the city's contemporary liberalism, Delanoë's sexual orientation was largely deemed a non-issue by the press and most Parisian voters alike.

In October 2002, however, Delanoë was attacked by a knife-wielding assassin who harbored a self-confessed hatred of gays. Fortunately, the mayor survived the attack, but the incident serves as a sobering reminder that, for all its latter-day tolerance, Paris is still not without its deeply homophobic elements.

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