

Pride: Gay, and Otherwise



SOME RIOTS are better than others; or, at the very least, more respectable. This is why we remember the 1969 Stonewall riot in New York's Christopher Street, rather than the Compton's Cafeteria riots of August 1966. The latter took place in San Francisco over two nights and involved transsexuals, transvestites, and street hustlers – what we in the UK today might call 'rent boys' or 'sex-workers'. Outcastes amongst the outcastes, so to speak. What the cops at the time called "female impersonators". In contrast, the Stonewall riot in New York involved mainly gay men and some lesbians – outcastes to be sure – but not nearly as 'appalling' as the clientele of Gene Compton's 24-hour Cafeteria in the Tenderloin district of San Francisco.

So it is that 'Stonewall' became the *cause célèbre* of the gay movement. However, I have no doubt at all that in the bustling defence plants and districts of the

West Coast from December 1941 onwards, there were many unreported fracas and collective fights between homosexuals and the cops. We must never forget that the abiding truth of all strivings amongst oppressed and exploited people is that their struggles are like icebergs – nine tenths of the resistance – lies beneath the surface of recorded history.



So, in marking Stonewall with pride parades, carnivals, and beer fests, we are honouring all those who went before: The Society for Human Rights (Chicago 1924), Vanguard, and Street Orphans (San Francisco 1965-1966), and the North Western Homosexual Law Reform Society (UK 1964), and many others. All the careful lobbyists, irate individuals, and bold campaigners deserve our respect (see Wikipedia's "List of LGBT actions in the United States prior to the Stonewall riots").

Broadly speaking closed-group organising and lobbying took place in the fifties in Britain and America, and these activities gave rise to public pickets, and small demonstrations in the sixties, gathering pace until the outbursts in San Francisco (1966) and New York (1969) blew the lid off police repression and witch-hunting.

It's a history of desperate courage amongst people widely seen as contemptable and disposable; trashy,

psychologically disturbed deviants, deserving only of beatings, exclusion, and incarceration. It is against this homosexual and transgendered history that recent proposals for 'Straight Pride' events are revealed as utterly absurd. It is not that 'Straight Pride' is offensive, it's just idiotic. This is because being heterosexual is the default orientation – its assertion and celebration saturates all our principal institutions – it is the leading sexual assumption of our culture, and as such, requires no special acknowledgement.

Of course, if reactionary idiots want to organise such events they must be allowed to do so, just as the revolting Ann Widcombe must be allowed to encourage researchers to look for scientific means of turning us straight. People must certainly be permitted to say what they like about us. By the same token we can give as good as we get. Discussion and argument must always trump censorship, and bans.

This brings me to another problem with Pride. I well remember being enchanted some years ago in Manchester by lads dressed as bats – ten-foot tall on stilts – striding through the milling crowds on Canal Street, shouting: "Bat coming through! Bat coming through!" It was only when I realised that they were advertising Bacardi that I came to my senses. Modern Pride events are awash with corporate sponsorship and endorsement by the authorities.

This has particularly annoyed *Queer Action Ireland* who are boycotting Dublin Pride because of the participation of the Gardai (police) in their uniforms. *Queer Action Ireland* is protesting because the police have a history of harassing and penalising us – and police agencies continue to enforce unfair and repressive immigration laws and much else of which most of us would heartily disapprove. Here, *Queer Action Ireland*, while being entirely correct in their assertions, are grievously missing the point.

They are not alone, however. Arguments against corporate sponsorship are widespread. The involvement of defence industries, big pharma, and the banks, in financing and participating in Pride

events continue, year-on-year, to cause great offence to those who want to preserve the flame of liberation, rather than the dreary realism of incorporation and inclusion. They've certainly got a point, but it is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of our situation.

In recent years in both Britain and the Irish Republic (excluding of course, the six northern Irish counties), homosexuals have been accorded equal rights. We may continue to be socially oppressed, the victims of rising acts of random violence, and of surreptitious discrimination, but we are equal before the law, as long as our foreign lovers do not fall foul of the immigration officers. We may marry, take out insurance, and receive pensions on the same terms as our straight compatriots. This legal emancipation is not liberation, but it is undoubtedly considerably better than what went before, even though transsexuals continue to have to battle over birth certificates, passports, and gender reassignment services.

As a consequence of this lengthy process of 'normalisation' Pride events have morphed over the years from relatively small embattled demonstrations of people demanding liberation at most, and equality at least, into prideful celebrations of homosexuality, queerness, and transgendering. In their carnivalesque exuberance these events serve the double function of marking and celebrating our inclusion into the ordinary life of society, and give the police, emergency services, armed forces, corporations and investors an invaluable opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to diversity.

As annoying as this might be, Pride today is not and cannot be an expression of gay, lesbian, trans advocacy or campaigning. It's a genuinely popular celebration of inclusion and diversity supported by homosexuals and trans people at large. Pride is no longer a radical political demonstration – and those who want it to be are simply living in the past.

**See also 'Gay Liberation: a brief moment in turbulent times'
at www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net**