

GAY COMMUNITY AND SPACE IN SPAIN

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I. THE GEOGRAPHICAL VIEW OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOMOSEXUALIDAD AND SPACE

What is talked about when the *gay community* is quoted? This collective is far away from being a homogeneous and same concerns group. What the prominence gay collectives have acquired during the last decades in many countries demonstrates that far away from being a clear identity group, they are a combination of groups, each one with different ways of integration, collectivization and self acceptance. The extensive approaches and strategies in order to demand the gay collectives' ambitions have contributed to make the public authorities started taking on those revindications, especially in the western societies. Cultural and social geography has gotten a remarkable publication that exposes more interest in the process right now than tree decades ago, although these works have multiplied since the nineties. There is no other way, the space is one of the keys in order to develop habits that have been forbidden or social badly thought of and they use the space as a secret expresion of recognition between similar people: «I'm here, therefore I am». Based on the relation between space and the gay community, some of the main and more expressive features of the sociocultural global change of the last decades can be explained. In the space references of the gay community, geography has a valious instrument, which allows us to know those changes and how they affect the different areas and states of the planet. On the contrary, the *Queer Theory* (By means of the so named *Queer Geography*) and the gay community in general get criteria from the geographical thought and basic arguments in their social demands and the political activism. The relationship that leads us to the self-criticism within gay collectives can also be talked about, because it cannot be said there is only one marginal gay community in the whole panet, and how certain gay cultures modify and destroy the codes and local expressions of other communities can also be talked about. In the last years some essays have appeared which question the Western, neocolonial, masculine, young and racist slant of the homosexual patterns. The

codes and terminology (*gay, queer, pink, leather, bear...*) are undoubtedly Anglo-Saxon and, specifically from the United States. That is useful for the two more representative archetypes of the homosexual profile of this culture. The global monoculture has deleted some of the main features of the national or local homosexual micro cultures, undervalued, unknown or simply non-existent before the massive arrival, mainly by the use of internet, of gay culture

II. BASIC CONCEPTS FOR STUDYING SPACE AND GAY COMMUNITY IN SPAIN

The main aspect or feature of the gay community is the fact that some of the individuals who take part in it satisfy some of the needs and demands (physical, social, commercial or attention and information) with same gender people and specially the male one (the gay term will exclusively refer to that gender). In that sense, not all the homosexuals satisfy the aforementioned needs, going to gay nature places (so they are not considered members of the gay community). Everybody knows that there are a lot of these people with a homosexual orientation (because of social conventionalism –fear of being ridiculed– because of religious beliefs or some other reasons) do not have sexual relationships with same gender people or, if they do so, they use other contact ways and they do not go to the places which this essay mentions (*chats*, personal columns in the mass medias or simply in everyday life).

Therefore, what is understood as the gay community is the social group which satisfies some of the needs or demands in the spaces which have a specific recognition by this collective. It is a wide social range that covers from people who meet each other in activist group places to those people who are married to a different gender person and have a social life environment that denies or hides their sexual tendencies, so they sometimes satisfy their needs in the shopping centre toilets. Gay term was considered in the Anglo-Saxon world and it refers to both, homosexuals in general and those homosexuals who are more aggressive in their demands. In this essay the gay term is presented with an intermediate acceptance, because it involves men who develop homosexual practices (sexual, relationship, commercial) and those who are more or less visible, even though their families, friends or job mates might or might not know about their sexual orientation.

This essay tries to provide some keys from the point of view of geography and to identify different levels of gay acceptance and social development taking into account the number and the nature of gay references which can be identified in the countries of the planet. The suggested method is capable of being put into practice in several stages, although, in that case, the planet scale is used in order to support the theory of the different degrees of visibility with objective data which are usually given to the different countries without clear criteria. In that sense, gay self-motivation that leads them to go to these spaces is going to be used. As it is developed in chart 1, some motivations which lead people to go to places of gay interest are suggested: a) to provide sexual satisfaction, b) to develop a social activity, c) to go shopping or acquire some services, d) to stay in a hotel during a trip, e) to get some information or help in groups or support institutions

These five categories do not go alone, but satisfaction can be usually provided in the same place for more than one of the suggested motivations.

- a) *Sexual satisfaction.* It is the most basic parameter in the relationship between space and homosexual behaviour.
- b) *Sociability needs.* As it is aforementioned, one of the first features of gay community visibility in a society is the appearance of spaces in which, even though sexual satisfaction can be provided, in the case of having appropriate places for that practice, social relationship can be developed.
- c) *Commercial and professional service satisfaction.* As better as the visibility is, there are more places and professional related to the gay community, on one hand these are close to the activist group and on the other hand these are more related to fashion, beauty, travel agencies, etc...
- d) *Tourist resorts.* In this essay hotel services have been put aside from other catering industries because they are mainly dedicated to different kinds of clients who come from different places.
- e) *Information and support search.* These non lucrative service requirements are achieved by means of a) people associations; they display the organization ability of a gay community in a city or in a country, b) public institutions.

Visibility and gay interest places are essential in order to describe the maturity degree and the gay community ability to organize themselves and demand – and finally reach equal rights. Without visibility, a collective is more vulnerable, so what activist collectives are demanding is to be more visible, or what is commonly called: to *come out*. From a geographical point of view the following degrees of visibility which apply to the territory are suggested:

- b) *Wide visibility.* Territories in which those members of the gay community who want to, do not have any problems to express themselves and to develop some activities related to their own individual or collective interests, are included in this category.
- c) *Medium visibility.* This category is applied to those territories in which a stable system has been settled and with a considerable number of spaces of social relationship, mainly bars and discos.
- d) *Reduced visibility.* Those territories in which there is a possibility to identify spatial references of gay interest are included in this category, although there are not generally a great number of those references related to the population who live in and, besides, these references are related sexual satisfaction; although in some of these territories there are places for socializing, but they are mainly in the big cities.
- e) *Non-visibility:* That is a main feature in the territories in which homosexual practices are illegal and can be punished by prison penalty or other kinds of punishment.

III. BASIC ANALYSIS ON VISIBILITY AND GAY COMMUNITY IN SPAIN

The most interesting aspects of the analysis on the regional scale are:

- *Wide visibility*: Catalonia and Madrid are the only regions that belong clearly to this category, since in them the commercial and professional places are very over the Spanish average.
- *Medium visibility*: The major touristic Spanish regions are in this category: Comunidad Valenciana, Baleares, Andalucía and Canarias. The Basque Contry and Aragón have got a relative medium-low number related to their population.
- *Reduced visibility*: Asturias, Cantabria, Castile-Leon, Castile-La Mancha, Ceuta, Extremadura, Galicia, Melilla and Murcia. Navarre and La Rioja, although with high percentage in institutional services, must be included in this category because the low references number related to the population.
- Regions do not exist with *non-visibility* in Spain. Even in the small territories of Ceuta and Melilla there are gay interest places.

Analysis on provincial scale:

- *Wide visibility*: The most visible provinces are those where the major cities are in: Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Zaragoza. In them the number of references is high o medium-high and they have a balance in the character of the references.
- *Medium visibility*: Very populated provinces in Spanish are in this category, mainly those whith important turistic resorts, ant two Basque provinces (Biscay and Alava). All those, except Tarragona, have capitals that surpass 200,000 inhabitants (Malaga, Bilbao, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Palma de Mallorca, Alicante, Granada and Vitoria).
- *Reduced visibility*: Most of the Spanish provinces belongs to this category (37 plus Ceuta and Melilla). These are regions mainly located in the Interior and the Northern country, but not few Mediterranean and Atlantic Provinces belong to this category too. Although in them they appear cities generally smaller than in the previous categories, there are not few, provincial capitals or no, that are located in these territories having surpassed 200,000 inhabitants (Murcia, Valladolid, Cordova, Vigo, Gijón...).
- Like in the case of the regions, provinces in Spain of *non-visibility* do not exist.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The social and cultural opening that Spain has experienced during the last decades has allowed one freer and more natural attitude related to homosexual practices. In fact, the possibility of marriage between individuals of the same genre has located Spain between the most progressive countries. Spain can be considered in general a country of *wide visibility*, but this mainly responds to the important number of gay references that urban regions have (Comunidad de Madrid, Cataluña). The *medium visibility* of other regions is motivated by

the existence of social meeting places, mainly in the main cities. Nevertheless, some of these regions are very influenced by the existence of turistic resorts with a lot of places oriented to foreign gay people. This can be noted in Andalusia, Balearic, Canary Islands and Comunidad Valenciana. In other cases, like Aragón or the Basque Country, the inclusion in this category obeys to a relatively high presence of commercial services and, however, a presence of social meeting places that anyway do not surpass the Spanish averages. Yet, most of the regions (eight plus Ceuta and Melilla) can, and must, be still considered between the territories in which the visibility is *reduced*, specially: Ceuta, Melilla, most of the center of the country (the two Castillas, Extremadura and Rioja) and the norther regions (Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria and Navarre), to which there would be added only one Mediterranean community (Murcia). The references related to the sexual satisfaction predominate in all of them. Whereas the references related to social meeting places and other services to assure identity and vindication are less important.

The provincial analysis confirms that the concentration of the gay references still is greater, so that only 13 provinces can be considered with *wide* or *medium visibility*. The *wide visibility* appears in those in which the five greater cities of the country are (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville y Zaragoza). The *medium visibility* is present in other provinces with important capitals (Bilbao, Vitoria) or/and with an important tourist sector (Malaga, Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, Balearic, Alicante, Granada and Tarragona). The other 37 provinces and Ceuta y Melilla, again the interior and the northern country, still have a *reduced visibility*, even though with remarkable differences among them. It is possible to be affirmed that an individual gay can only develop an open and coherent life to his condition all the day long only in cities like Madrid or Barcelona (*wide visibility*). He will not have any problem to exert it during the nocturnal hours in Alicante or Bilbao (*medium visibility*); but he will have to take a life much more hidden in Badajoz or Burgos (*reduced visibility*). Naturally all these considerations get worse when we talk about the rural spaces of most of the Spanish provinces (even in those of *wide visibility*)

In general, the data that translate the spacial behavior of the gay community in Spain, like in so many subjects of geographical character, offer a complex reality of contrasts. Spain has got a progressive legal context, considered one of the most advanced in the world. Nevertheless it appears in Spain a social and territorial reality very different among regions and provinces, not always so in vanguard. As it is not either in vanguard the attitude of the Spanish geographer's community, gays or not gays, whose interest about these topics has been rather little in comparison with other social scientists.

