

## **Brasseur, Pierre. 'Sylvie Tissot, Gay-friendly. Acceptation et contrôle de l'homosexualité à Paris et à New York', Sociologie, vol. 11, no. 4, 2020, pp. 433-436.**

This book offers a reflexion on what loving (or at least not hating) gays and lesbians today are within the Parisian and New York progressive bourgeoisie. Gay friendliness offers both the sociology of gay and lesbian acceptance and the sociology of ambiguity. The book begins with the observation that gay men and lesbians today are neither fully rejected by heterosexuals nor fully integrated into social order. They remain a category of individuals and their presence in urban spaces remains noticeable. This book examines the ambiguous place they occupy, a place that is sometimes valued and sought after.

To do so, Sylvie Tissot proposes a double step: the first is to analyse the acceptance of homosexuality from the point of view of heterosexuals, and the second is not to focus on the analysis of any type of heterosexual. In fact, in this book, the floor is given to so-called bourgeois heterosexuals and, more specifically, to those who live in neighbourhoods identified as gay or lesbian, the Marais in Paris, and the Park Slope in New York. The idea is to turn on the often-entrenched notion that homophobia is primarily a prerogative of the popular class. While none of the interviewees in the two cities considered themselves homophobic - most declared themselves 'allies' - liking gays and lesbians, enjoying their company at dinner parties, seeing them as good neighbours, or even as friends with whom to share heartbreak or partying does not mean that this is unconditional. To analyse this phenomenon, sociologists have proposed an interview survey. Between 2011 and 2016, 39 interviews were conducted in France and 56 in the United States with 58 heterosexuals and 37 gays and lesbians.

### **These Curious Heterosexuals\*\***

The book is divided into four chapters. The first examines the process of becoming gay-friendly. It traces the journeys of middle-class heterosexuals of different ages, who have different ways of looking at homosexuality. As several surveys have shown, young people and women are more friendly than men and older people, with the 'class' variable playing only a limited role in the sympathy expressed towards homosexuals. Sylvie Tissot shows that it is the ability to identify and name homosexuality that explains these differences and that this ability varies with age. The author distinguished three generations that differ in their specific relationship to homosexuality. The first generation, born between 1930 and 1955 and raised in a social context where homosexuality was considered a pathology on both sides of the Atlantic, is characterised by opinions that are not outright hostile (p. 25) to homosexuality, but which do have reservations, particularly about opening marriages to same-sex couples. Furthermore, these individuals prefer to use the term 'homosexual' rather than 'gay' or 'lesbian'.

For the second generation, born between 1955 and 1975, 'It would not be cool not to be gay friendly', as one respondent, Liz, puts it. These individuals are close to the first generation and grew up in a context where the reprisal of homosexuality had not completely disappeared, but their outlook was less pathologising than that of their elders. Gay liberation is a real issue for them, and they describe being gay-friendly as an apprenticeship during which they have had to question internalised heterosexual norms and homophobic values. There is a marked difference between France and the United States, where the history of LGBT struggles is taught more systematically monthly in North American universities. For the third generation, born between 1975 and 1990, gay friendliness is described as both a 'non-issue' and a trial, SUS earlier. This specific relationship with homosexuality is linked to a decline in 'radical' postures within the LGBT population and a form of 'sexual cleansing' of cities, where sex shops, prostitution, and pick-up lines have closed to make way, among other things, for housing in the middle and upper classes. There is also a neighbourhood effect on the acceptance of homosexuality, particularly in the proximity of urban spaces with 'bad reputations', which fosters the impression that bourgeois heterosexuals with atypical residential histories are part of a minority.

The second chapter examines how issues of same-sex marriage and same-sex-parent families structure the construction of gay friendliness. North American respondents view the opening of marriage to same-sex couples as a strong democratic issue. In France, there is a more cautious attitude, especially among men, for whom sexuality and fortiori intimacy must not be the subject of legislation for asserted sexual liberalism. For these French respondents, privacy was nothing but political, even if they understood the importance of the symbolic dimension of opening up marriages to gays and lesbians. 'Everyone is free to do what they want with their sexuality,' one French respondent summarises, while another considers the old-fashioned demand for 'marriage for all'. In the United States, coparenting is often seen as a factor of integration, as parents neutralise deviant sexual orientation. The heterosexuals we interviewed also taught their children to accept homosexuality, both as an achievement and as a way of giving concrete expression to the open-minded values they have tried to instil in their children; some parents seek to encourage their offspring's contact with children from 'diverse' backgrounds. However, when it comes to their children's sexuality, they appear less enthusiastic, with a few considering homosexuality a possible love option.

The third chapter looks more specifically at heterosexual women, referred to as allies, and proposes a sociological explanation of the forms of friendships between gay men and heterosexual women. One of the reasons for this closeness is that managing relationships with others remains a 'feminine' task in these bourgeois couples: heterosexual men are less likely to claim to have gay friends. Sylvie Tissot also suggests a discussion of the profane figure of the 'queer girl', often portrayed in films, which primarily concerns women who declare themselves agreeing with male/female equality norms, but who face structural and daily gender inequalities within their couple. Having a gay friend can be seen as a substitute for an unsatisfactory conjugal relationship, in the form of a punctual distancing from male domination linked to an apparent shared femininity, but not just any kind of gay man can become friends with these women: you have to be classy, tasteful, like to dance, interested in decorating – everything the husband does not do. This figure also appears among women with atypical conjugal relationships, particularly in cases of marital separation. Although the company of gays is generally sought, there is a certain lesbophobia among heterosexual men and women, which the sociologist explained by the strong injunction to 'femininity' that subsists in this favoured class, a woman, that most lesbians would not respect. The fourth and last chapters examine the boundaries of gay friendliness. Being gay-friendly is also a form of distinction – homophobia is typically considered a 'fault of taste' (p. 221) – and a sign of good education and intellectual superiority, particularly compared to the 'suburbs' or the 'countryside'. The visibility of gays and lesbians is therefore desirable but needs to be framed.

### **Straight privilege**

This book is also a reflex on 'hetero privilege'. For heterosexuals, the disadvantages of putting up with gay men and lesbians are virtually nil, whereas the advantages they derive from them are significant. Bourgeois heterosexuals 'use' homosexuality to distinguish themselves from the working classes and deny this posture. For example, throughout the book, we note a certain naïveté, or form of blindness, for the heterosexuals interviewed: they have difficulty seeing gays and lesbians caught up in systems of domination and oppression. This blindness is the same for racism and can be assumed to apply to all other forms of discrimination. 'I do not see colour, I do not see sexuality' sums up one of them. This 'hetero privilege' can also be observed in heterosexual reactions to alternative forms of love and sexual relationships, such as polyamory. This practice, about which some proponents have returned, dikes the reappropriation of sexual and conjugal norms from the LGBT community and must fit within a very precise framework: values of openness, but not at all costs. Polyamory must remain within the framework of conjugal love: flirting and sexual relations ('no kink please') are forbidden during polyamorous sociability that takes place regularly in neighbourhood cafés. Gay friendliness is finally under tension in the judgment that these heterosexuals make of gays and lesbians; some judge very harshly gays who would have sexual relations in the purely recreational mode? Therefore, to remain acceptable, gays and lesbians need to have a sexuality that is confined to the conjugal sphere (i.e., monogamous), consider the possibility of having a child, not be overly politicised or overly demanding, and be part of the local fabric by getting involved in daily activities that serve the community. They had to share the same likes and dislikes. This is the case, for example, in food where vegetarianism is almost compulsory. The same is true in these neighbourhoods, where the number of 'gay' businesses, such as sex shops, is declining and the number of 'expensive' businesses is on the rise.

Ultimately, this book can also be read as a guide to good homosexuality accepted by heterosexuals, homosexuality that must be visible because 'it's cool' (p. 259), and gays and lesbians are associated with good taste, elegance, and culture. Not all gays and lesbians are accepted; however, especially those deemed too 'extreme' in their physical condition, such as the case of the 'queen', to be accepted by the heterosexual couples surveyed, the gay man must remain a man despite everything. If he can express forms of femininity, it must be "modern" and remain "elegant" and "classy". This conditional closeness can also be seen in places where "hetero/gay" forms of friendship can be expressed; Dinners are an accepted form, but with a few exceptions, heterosexual couples do not go out in gay and lesbian social circles; only single men and women admit to frequenting these places. Among women, the gay party scene is described as both more fun and "safe" than "heterosexual" venues. Heterosexual men who claim to have gone

out to gay clubs do so with open-minded values but also with the assumption that it was a tactic to capture heterosexual girls who go out to escape the forms of harassment heterosexual men are guilty of when searching for a sexual partner.

## The Place of Gays and Lesbians

At the end of the book, Sylvie Tissot offers a rich ethnography of a rarely surveyed population, such as heterosexuals. It is a pleasure, for example, to follow these few heterosexual men a priori well during the first interviews, as they reveal their true selves over the course of encounters, as the night progresses or is intoxicated with alcohol, a dimension emphasised several times in the book and rarely assumed so clearly by sociology. Gay friendliness also provides access to substantial and varied literature and pedagogically reviews the contributions of French sociology and Anglo-American homosexuality.

Two points of discussion are worth highlighting. The first is an epilogue. Composed of ten pages, in which the author gives the floor to lesbians and gays living in these same neighbourhoods, as announced in the introduction, Sylvie Tissot interviewed 37 gays and lesbians self-identified as such (p. 17). The words of these 37 interviewees had little appearance in the rest of the book, except as illustrations of what heterosexuals say. These final pages stand out from the rest of the book, as they speak of 'gays and lesbians' as an almost homogeneous group from one country to another, with an almost equivocal attitude towards heterosexuals. However, this is perhaps the subject of another survey or book. The second point of discussion is as follows. Generally, the place of lesbians in the overall economy of the book is sometimes disturbing. The book is mostly about gays, with questions about lesbians often complementing the analysis of gays, with the result that we learn very little about the attitudes of bourgeois heterosexuals toward lesbian women.

Pierre Brasseur, [brasseurph@gmail.com](mailto:brasseurph@gmail.com)