

Masaryk University

Transnational Migration – Queer Migration to Urban Meccas

Final Paper

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Introduction: Transnational migration and the social integration of GLBT migrants into western gay capitals

In this final paper, I will be addressing the issue of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender) transnational and internal migrants from rural areas or non-western countries into the GLBT communities within western-style “gay capitals” or “Gay Meccas” and will discuss the different motivations of GLBT people to migrate from their home communities and integrate into already existing communities in the western world, and how this communities form. The paper will try to cover the different obstacles of such migrations as well as the reasons and causes of it, giving a historical overview of migration of GLBT people to urban centers and the beginnings of GLBT urban communities, in order to understand the different social institutions and benefits which drive LGBT people to migrate into such neighborhoods and communities.

Furthermore, the research will not only focus on the self-identification of those people, but the reasons behind their decision to radically change their life settings in order to satisfy unique needs which could not be satisfied within their own home environments and places of origin, such as finding a partner or being able to freely self-express their gender identity or sexual orientation without society’s heteronormative values and judgment. The paper will discuss and try to give answers to issues such as self-identification with the GLBT community and personal identity of the GLBT migrant as a whole, the different efforts of the receiving communities to accommodate the needs of newcomers and the social norms within the GLBT community and the destination cities regarding social stigma and approach to newly arrived immigrants into the community’s social settings, such as community centers, bars and clubs, social gatherings et.al. The research will try to look into specific groups and organizations of ethnic or social minorities within the GLBT community in order to understand the need for the existence of such subgroups

in the broader community and how they participate in communal events and help integrate people into the wider and broader GLBT environment of the “gayborhood” in a gay mecca.

What are the reasons and causes for the migration of queer/LGBT people into western-style gay urban “meccas”? How did these communities form and how do they cope with these migrants? My hypothesis is that the historical roots of the creation of such urban communities may lie in the structural and economic uniqueness of these urban settings and how liberal their current societies are. The need of LGBT people for a safe environment where they can live freely is understandable, yet it is important to understand that in the case of transnational migration, legal issues as well as the value of the home left behind stress the importance of this migration for the emotional state of the queer individual as well as their striving for happiness and fulfillment, which according to the historical period or the cultural setting of each country may also be the case of internal migration within a country from a rural to an urban community. The queer migration is not a new phenomenon in most cases, and most well established communities offer social services and support for their members, which might also be a reason to why LGBT people might prefer a move to an existing community rather than to create new communities in either rural settings or in urban centers which are less known for their openness towards sexual minorities.

Historical background

“Starting around the mid-to-late twentieth century, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) individuals transformed urban spaces into centers of social, cultural, and political utility.” (Ruiz, 2012) Sexual minorities started flocking into urban centers seeking a refuge of tolerance where they could enjoy the anonymity that a great city gives to the individual. These

environments weren't just spaces where these groups of men and women could find sexual partners, but also became the "epicenters of an international countercultural identity movement" (Ruiz, 2012). It was that movement that gave the first umbrella definitions to sexual minorities, then considered deviants, creating and giving powerful meanings to words such as "gay" or "lesbians" and creating communities and subcultures which could support them by challenging heteronormative-cisgender ideals and by building businesses and institutions that gave them legitimacy (Ruiz, 2012).

Gay identity is seen by scholars in different ways, and the two major views come from an ongoing debate on whether non-heterosexual inclinations are predetermined or not, or in other words, do they come from "nurture or nature"? This paper will discuss queer identity regarding it from a constructivist point of view, as suggested by studies from the late 20th century (Epstein, 1987; Foucault, 1978; Lauria & Knopp, 1985). These scholars regard queer identity as a whole as socially constructed in a process of "developmental outcomes", which contradict the opposite idea that queer identity is part of an innate predetermined identity (Ruiz, 2012). I will argue and regard this issue as a more complex one, and will presume that sexuality is preordained, but that sexual (cultural) identity, not the sexual orientation or gender identity itself, is socially constructed and is a product and result of cultural influence created by people and culture, and not a natural identity as it has been suggested by scholars like Foucault or by popular culture.

The beginnings of an established and organized queer urbanism which facilitated the building of stable and broad queer communities in major urban centers began as described by scholars (Bailey, 1998; Castells, 1983; Knopp, 1990a, 1990b), began in the 1960's and 1970's, as a result of the creation of vacancy in inner-city housing by the urban middle classes which were opting for quality suburban housing. LGBT people were driven to these vacant inner-city

neighborhoods in the search for anonymity and the desire for political power, sexual experimentation and a sense of safety (Ruiz, 2012). The critical moment which is seen as the beginning of gay migration to urban centers is the Stonewall Riots beginning June 28th, 1969. As a “catharsis” of expression for the repressed LGBT minority groups in the United States, migration to San Francisco, as an example, increases exponentially. In Paul Ruiz’s study, he notes that there is no accurate way of knowing exactly how many LGBT newcomers immigrated to those major cities and their queer urban “gayborhoods”, but he quotes from a study that followed the growth in numbers of gay businesses and organizations proving growth from the end of the 1960s until the 1980’s proving the exponential growth of these communities which created not only housing agglomerations of LGBT people but also a cultural, civic culture, social and economic structure for a communal identity. Ruiz comments based on a study by Castells (1983) that a second wave of usually affluent gay men flocked the already established neighborhoods and their surroundings, replacing poorer members of the community and then purchasing and renovating buildings and expanding into other areas, creating frictions with other minority groups as in the case of San Francisco’s Mission district and the Latino minority, but also creating economic interests as they improved the value of properties. Castells also explains how and why Lesbian agglomerations are different and virtually don’t exist, as they lesbian women have different natural interests such as the caretaking of children, less access to economic resources and being more prone to male violence, they created secluded communities lacking the “obvious physical characteristics” of subculturization common in gay male communities (Ruiz, 2012).

In his article “Urbanism and Gay Identity” (2012), Ruiz quotes from J. D’Emilio’s article “Gay politics and community in San Francisco since World War II” where D’Emilio explains

Gay urbanization through the liberation movement as so: “The gay liberation movement [...] began the transformation of a sexual subculture into an urban community. The group life of gay men and women came to encompass not only erotic interactions but also political, religious and cultural activity. Homosexuality and lesbianism [became] less of a sexual category and more of a human identity.” And so, in the decades that came after the 1950’s, LGBT people have sought to liberate themselves from social stigma by moving to open-minded cities (Ruiz, 2012), where they organized civic societies and associations which untied mainly gays and lesbians under shared values and goals. Such groups, as the Gay Liberation Front and the Daughters of Bilitis, founded in California, gave the ground for political activity and the creation of community centers and social groups along with the already established gay and lesbian bars and nightclubs which supported the needs of the queer communities in the urban agglomerations. Urbanism became the “platform for political power”, along which LGBT people could create an identity and a counterculture (Ruiz, 2012).

Study cases

The following part of the study will discuss several different cases of immigration to gay meccas, in order to target the understanding of how and why GLBT people move and migrate specifically to already existing communities. Several cities will be discussed, all of them are considered to be western style cities, the study cases will discuss different subgroups and circumstances, in order to bring a broad but brief overview of the reasons for queer migration into urban gay meccas.

United States – Latinos in San Francisco

Queer Latinos were a part of the LGBT migrations to San Francisco during the 1960's and 1970's, during the midst of countercultural and social movement era, and were part of two social and political cultures in the San Francisco Bay area, which brought to the eventual creation of GALA, a the Gay Latino Alliance, which brought together people, skills and social networks. It was an organization which sought to create a space for the development of a gender, sexual, cultural and ethnic identity to gay and lesbian Latinos. The two clashing identities of the members of GALA and all LGBT Latinos, was due to the fact that “Chicano” or “Latino”, as cultural and social terms, were seen as heterosexual definitions, and the term “gay” was seen by the broad society as mainly a racially constructed white term. These two clashing understandings left little space for the mixing of identities, leaving Latinos to deal with deep homophobia rooted in the Latino neighborhoods which neighbors the gay area of the Castro and its more upscale surroundings. Therefore, the struggle of GLBT Latinos was multidimensional (Horacio, 2003). The eventual success of GALA's challenging of the gay white and heterosexual Latino was their integration of identities and challenging of social norms in the predominantly white gay counterculture, which brought to their inclusion even if they were less visible in the Castro neighborhood, and in the process, they not only gave a name but also created a strong subculture which was involved politically and culturally in their surrounding's stronger communities (Horacio, 2003).

East-West migration, the case of Poland

In their article from 2013, “Like a Bomb in the Gasoline Station’: East–West Migration and Transnational Activism around Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Politics in Poland”, Jon Binnie and and Kristian Klesse discuss and examine the relationship

between transnational mobility, identity and politics around LGBT networks in Poland and Central Europe. In their work, Binnie and Klesse found that it is difficult to separate economic factors from the regular reasons which cause the migration of LGBT people, and in the case of Poland, mainly homophobia, and both are important in the decision making process of GLBT migrants who move in or out of Poland. The main reasons for leaving the country are rooted in the high oppression sexual minorities experience in Poland, which limit the possibility of freely self-express in Polish society. The mass migrations of LGBT people from Poland, have helped shape LGBT politics in the country and made it an important issue when promoting tolerance and acceptance, accusing Poland of not being “completely and fully European”. Binnie and Klesse also explain how GLBT people in Poland have romanticized other European Union countries as havens, especially the United Kingdom, causing them to overlook internal issues of homophobia within London and the United Kingdom. Thus, creating a reality in which GLBT poles leave the country dreaming of a multicultural and tolerant society, and are many times disappointed due to xenophobia, homophobia and economic struggle and the hardships any immigrant faces when trying to build the life they dreamed of in other countries (Binnie and Klesse, 2013).

Australia – A teenage narrative

In their work “It's About Time You Came Out: Sexualities, Mobility and Home.” Waitt and Gormann-Murray relate the story of a gay male from rural Australia in four stories which explain the pursuit for belonging and a home in Australia while dealing with local rural/urban culture and gender roles, expressing the fluidity of socially constructed definitions about gender and sexuality, trying to explain to queer historians and geographers the personal process gay youth in Australia goes through when coming out and migrating to urban centers. The process, as explained in Waitt and Gormann-Murrays research, begins in research and learning. The young gay man goes through a period of exclusion and marginalization followed by an inner need to find a new home, but when the young man leaves his home town, he deals with a crisis of

identity also due to the change in gender roles as perceived by him due to his roots in a rural and traditional environment, coming to a liberal urban community which challenges all traditionally accepted and socially constructed gender and sex roles, leaving the subject with a gender role identity crisis and a longing for the familiar and a never-ending quest to find a place which feels familiar, taking from his own experiences of his childhood's sense of what is a home. Some of the pre-immigration research nowadays is virtual and relies on internet searching and websites, giving the subject an idyllic homecoming perspective of the reality of cities like Sidney and its gay community. When finally arriving to a gay neighborhood in Sidney, the young man deals with identity issues as he firstly finds himself, and gains confidence regarding his sexual and gender identity, but loses himself as he does not fit in with the conventional urban gender roles and the mainstream gay culture set in the gay gentrified quarters, and the outcomes of the social movements which sprung in the 1970's. The young gay male in this case will try to fit in, and style himself to fit the newly adopted perceptions of gay masculinity, which in many cases lead to the use of alcohol, drugs and excessive weight lifting, and objectify the newcomer that is socially tagged as "fresh meat", all of which may lead paradoxically to a sense of not belonging. Many young gay men see their rural roots and homes in a demonized and negative way, and are thus trapped in a cycle of not belonging, and recourse to looking for a third environment where to find themselves out of the gay quarters, but still close to the city center, in order to increase the probability to finding a partner (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011).

Mexico and Central America - moving to the United States

In an article published in *The Atlantic* in 2013, Amy Lieberman tells the story of immigrants from the LGBT communities; that are on their way to a better life in the United States. Although Lieberman does not discuss the target communities to which these immigrants

are aiming for, she tells about the immigration process, and specifically about the experiences they live during their trajectory through Mexico. Lieberman quotes gay and transgender immigrants on their way from rural and urban areas in Central America and Mexico, which pass through shelters on their way to cross the border by land. These quotes tell a story of oppression, fear and hope. LGBT migrants face a fear in the immigrant shelters which they seek to avoid; they are threatened by other immigrants with physical and verbal homophobia, to a point that due to the increasing numbers in gay and transgender migrants, some shelters have now started to specifically give services only to LGBT migrants. "We're seeing more and more transgender migrants and it's difficult for the migrant houses because they don't know where to place them," when trying to place a transgender in a male or female dormitory of a non LGBT shelter, transgender people deal with homophobia and transphobia to a point where they are neither accepted to their birth sex dormitory nor to their assigned gender dormitories, creating a need for their own separate section, which most shelters lack. As most heterosexual migrants are uneducated, they do not have the knowledge and tolerance towards sexual minorities, resulting in violence and deaths of LGBT shelter seekers, which in many times try to avoid such institutions in order to keep safe. According to Lieberman, 3% of all migrants are transgenders, surpassing their percentage in the total population of 1% and the percentage of women immigrants which travel by land. Due to these factors, many migrants stay in the closet and hide their sexual and gender identities, causing them to be virtually invisible, and the designated separate rooms to be no longer used by them in order to avoid being targeted. Although many LGBT migrants saw the United states as their final destination, border control and legal changes in Mexico City, which legalized gay marriage and has a stable and strong LGBT community and tolerance policies, has caused many Central American LGBT migrants to change their final destinations and remain in Mexican soil, benefiting from knowledge of the Spanish language

and Mexican culture, which has helped them integrate into one of Latin America's biggest LGBT communities.

Israel – Palestinians in Tel-Aviv

In their 2008 study, “Nowhere to Run: Gay Palestinian Asylum-Seekers in Israel,” Michael Kagan and Anat Ben-Dor describe Israel's policies towards LGBT Palestinian asylum seekers in Israel, which has in the past few years tried to promote itself in the western world as a tolerant haven for LGBT people. But when it comes to LGBT Palestinians, Israel policies are unsympathetic. Contrasting greatly with Israel's vibrant gay-tolerant urban mecca, Tel-Aviv, in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which are de jure a current part of Israel's Jurisdiction, LGBT Palestinians face deep oppression and brutal violence. In the Palestinian authorities, there have been cases of cruel torture of men and transgender done by other Palestinian men, and sometimes by authorities that accuse LGBT Palestinians of cooperation with the Israelis or/and of prostitution. In the pursuit of refuge and protection, many LGBT Palestinians try to flee to the more tolerant Israeli-Jewish majority cities, but Israel refuses to even review applications for asylum from LGBT Palestinians, leaving them with only one possibility – to turn to the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva for applications for asylum in Israel. In many cases, LGBT Palestinians are arrested in Israel and sent back to Palestinian territories, leaving them defenseless and submitting them to further violence and retaliation from their families and Palestinian authorities, putting their lives at risk. Israel avoids dealing with asylum request from Palestinians due to security measures, breaking several agreements and conventions and even disregarding Israel's commitment by its own law to human and civic rights, a fact that according to Kagan and Ben-Dor, Israel could avoid if they did look at each request individually. Israel's security policies cannot allow more Palestinians in Israeli territory, but that leaves LGBT Palestinians with nowhere to turn, in a geographic neighborhood that is known for its

intolerance and oppression (Kagan and Ben-Dor, 2008). Tel Aviv might have become a gay urban mecca, but its doors are only open for those welcomed by Israeli policies.

Conclusion

Gay meccas have been romanticized and seen by LGBT peoples as their final geographic destination in life, they are idealized as places of sexual freedom where experimentation and love can be found. The way to reach them is not without difficulty, and many deal with issues not expected by the immigrants themselves, which in the case of western cultures, have stigmatized gay epicenters as San Francisco and London as environments which completely suit the needs of LGBT people due to their relatively tolerant multicultural, cosmopolitan societies. The above literary overview and historical research only tell a small portion of a much broader phenomenon. Queer migrations as we know them started during the 20th century, but research on the topic is limited, and the geography, psychology and sociological research of the subject is also lacking. The different characteristics of this issue, such as violence, the displacement of sexual minority refugees throughout the world, the development of a sexual and gender identity in rural areas and out of the epicenters of gay culture, the unique case of transgender migrants and how the local LGBT communities in gay meccas are dealing with sexual minority migrants as well as national and regional institutions is not an issue that has been discussed or researched enough, even if the beginning of its research came already in the 1970's in the early years of what is now called "the great queer migrations", the social effects are poorly discussed and further knowledge is needed in order to tackle this issue practically and help LGBT immigrants from either rural areas in countries where LGBT communities exist, or international refugees seeking asylum in gay-friendly environments. Another issue which I found interesting during my research is the clash of multiple identities and the inability of rural immigrants to truly incorporate into an already existing community such as in the case of Latinos in San Francisco,

Palestinians in Tel-Aviv, Poles in the United Kingdom and rural youth in Sidney. The incapability of local institutions and community organizations to incorporate and help the newcomers is worrying; especially due to the violence and homophobia/transphobia these sexual minorities face in their hometowns.

Further research propositions

Given the ability to further research this issue, I believe it is crucial to map the common characteristics of all cases in western societies and also explore further cases of Asian/Islamic/African societies and their LGBT migrants, not only in order to map the geography of these migrations and in order to understand the reasons behind them, but also in order to aid organizations in dealing with newcomers and immigrants in the migration process, as well as helping LGBT people to build local communities in areas where communal infrastructure for sexual minorities is lacking, thus helping them build a safe and fulfilling life in their own home environments where that is possible. Further research should not only focus on qualitative research of such cases as research in this paper, but also a quantitative research which would gather data regarding the issue as a whole, asking in each case about the factors which lead to migration, the reason behind the destination choice, networks of support and institution, identity development and clashes, social integration in existing communities, satisfaction with government and local authorities, issues regarding asylum seekers and refugees and the legal status of them in each country. Such data should be gathered from LGBT people throughout the world, a task that can nowadays be successfully done via internet. Whereas in most developed countries such data could be relatively easily gathered, in remote areas and underdeveloped regions throughout the world, such data will be impossible to collect, especially because finding GLBT people in such places could be extremely difficult. Working with local organizations in gay urban epicenters could resolve this issue only if they have access and

cooperation with already settled migrants from diverse backgrounds, which could help create a quantitative research and a database of answers which could produce a more accurate result and give answers to many more questions.

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