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Conference “Stonewall at 50 and Beyond: Interrogating the Legacy and Memory of the 1969 Riots”

Université Paris Est Créteil, June 3-5, 2019

Référence électronique

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The international conference *Stonewall at 50 and Beyond: Interrogating the Legacy and Memory of the 1969 Riots* was organized by Guillaume Marche and Antoine Servel (research group IMAGER EA 5958 from the Université Paris Est Créteil), Catherin Achin, Hugo Bouvard, and Lucie Prauthois (research group IRSSO UMR 7170 from the Université Paris-Dauphine), Emmanuel Beaubatie (research group IRIS UMR8156 – U997) as well as Damien Trawalé (Université Paris VII – URMIS). Held at the Université Paris Est Créteil in France during June 2019 to commemorate the 1969 riots that took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York City, researchers of various disciplines from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States gathered to share and discuss recent works on the topic. Five workshops, two conference plenaries, and a film screening took place over the course of three days.

On the first day of the conference, after opening remarks by Claire Hancock (Université Paris Est Créteil), the first conference plenary was given by Mignon Moore (Barnard College, Columbia University) and was called, “The world has changed: LGBTQ People of Color Negotiate Family, Politics and Culture.” This talk, which reviewed the existing literature and movement work of LGBTQ+ people of color, included personal experiences as well as other empirical research to ground a queer of color analysis.

Following this plenary was Workshop 1 with the theme of “Questioning Stonewall as the center of LGBTQ Liberation.” The first presenter, Estela Diaz (Columbia University), takes an archival approach to identify “cultural straddling” and argues this occurs when “individuals must navigate between formal and informal economies, evolving social norms, and shifting political formations.” In this case, because of several intersecting social forces like racism and oppressive sexual cultures, some black lesbians relied on sex work as a source of income and to construct spaces to express their sexuality. Some of these archival materials and oral histories composed between 1950 and 1975 preclude the Stonewall Riots and provide further socio-historical evidence of queer worldmaking taking shape before 1969. The next presenter, Charlotte Thomas Hebert (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), takes an archival and ethnographic approach to LGBTQ+ social movement work in New York City. Using the case of the annual Heritage of Pride Parade, Hebert critically assesses the institutionalization of the mainstream pride parade and draws upon examples of counter-movements to better understand the negotiation of space and state repression.

While Hebert’s research tracks the historical development of the annual Heritage of Pride parade, the next presentation examines contemporary grassroots activist responses to the institutionalization of these parades. Robert Baez (University of Florida) details “the movement

to reclaim pride” using organizational documents of three queer and trans activist organizations in the United States. He argues that these activist groups seek to “repoliticize” the LGBTQ+ movement, overlap with other leftist movements, and draw upon intersectional analyses to inform their work. To close this workshop, Quentin Zimmerman (Université Lille 3) interrogates the memory of Stonewall through rigorous archival analysis. Zimmerman argues that the memory of Stonewall has been shaped through the media, storytelling, and the use of commemorative vehicles such as annual pride parades. However, the ways in which we remember the Stonewall riots often erases particular politics and peoples, especially fleeting moments of queer rebellion that occurred prior to the 1969 riots. This erasure, according to Zimmerman, contributes to the material reproduction of economic and legal oppressions. Through analyzing militant activist groups in France and the United States, Zimmerman tracks how these groups conceptualize these forms of violence and how they propose to resist them. The research presented in this workshop transcends mainstream frames and questions the lasting memory of the Stonewall Riots to reconsider its effects.

Following Workshop 1 was a film screening and discussion of the documentary *History Doesn't Have to Repeat Itself* by Stéphane Gérard (2014). The film takes place in 2012 and documents LGBTQ+ communities in New York City challenging assimilationist politics by including several perspectives and visions of liberation. Gérard's film sets some of the thematic groundwork for the conference and situates sexual politics and the AIDS epidemic within seven conversations detailed throughout the film. It was a useful place from which the subsequent workshops were able to develop, and this brought the first day of the conference to a close.

Day 2 of conference began with Workshop 2 titled, “Representing Stonewall: Invisibilization, Normalization, and Homonormativity.” First up, Anna Carolin Müller (Universität Kassel) argues that Roland Emmerich's film *Stonewall* (2015) “generates a homonormative aesthetic that sustains heteronormative structures instead of criticizing them, which was the primary goal of the Stonewall Riots and the Gay Liberation Movement.” Using the film to build on what she has termed “hegemonic queer masculinity,” Müller explores representation and the aesthetics of mainstream LGBTQ+ movement work. Next, Xavier Lemoine (Université Paris-Est-Marne La Vallée) examines the Doric Wilson play *Street Theater*, which recreates the atmosphere of Stonewall on the eve of the riots. Lemoine tracks multiple productions of this work and questions the political and cultural connections to social mobilization. “The script is a first trace that explores the mechanisms of representation and retrospection at work in the construction of gay memory as a militant tool,” says Lemoine. The presenter finds the piece is tenuous and creates “a space of productive dissent.”

The succeeding presentation was by Anamarija Horvat (Northumbria University), who studies the UK film *Pride* (2014). The film takes place in the 1980s and tells the story of Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners (LGSM) who went on strike to ultimately influence policy and the movement. Examining how activism becomes gendered in the film and the representation of political realities, Horvat argues “that *Pride* marginalizes lesbian separatist activists in favor of LGSM's gay male members, and that it depicts heterosexual women as primarily caregivers in spite of their own activist role.” Drawing on archival research to compare and contrast the “queer activist memory,” Horvat does not wish to critique the film over inaccuracies of

historical facts but rather interpret how the version of history presented in the film comments on the LGBTQ+ movement. Last, Louise Barrière (Université de Lorraine) continues with cultural analysis by focusing attention to communities constructed around music. Queercore is a United States-based culture formed in the late 1980s and is situated on the fringe of punk and LGBTQ+. Barrière argues the Queercore movement has used the riot imagery of the Stonewall riots to distinguish itself from the mainstream LGBTQ+ movement. At the same time, Barrière understands these boundaries are not as rigid as they seem. What may be considered “mainstream” and “underground” is in constant flux. Overall, the presenters of Workshop 2 explore the politics of Stonewall in film, theatre, and music, challenging us to analyze how artists has interpreted the 1969 riots and subsequent movements.

The next conference plenary was given by Marc Stein (San Francisco State University) and was titled, “Historicizing Stonewall: Riots, Resistance, and Revolution.” Using research from his recently released book *The Stonewall Riots: A Documentary History* (2019), Stein “considers diverse perspectives on what happened during the Stonewall riots, competing explanations for why they occurred, conflicting arguments about how they mattered, and critical questions about who today lays claim to the legacy of the rebellion.” Stein analyzes two hundred primary sources from newspapers and movement organizations to provide an account of how LGBTQ+ life has developed over the decades and complicates the cultural emphasis of the Stonewall riots by exploring documents of the historical moment.

To close Day 2 of the conference was Workshop 3 titled, “The Heritage of Stonewall in Gay Pride Celebrations around the World.” Beginning the discussion by sharing a long-term empirical study of various cultural productions since 2001, Lüder Tietz (Carl von Ossietzky Universität, Oldenburg) retells “the various political debates around pride parades, the shifting memory of the Stonewall riots, and the forgetting of the specific histories of [LGBTQ+] movements in Germany.” This research shows how the movements in Germany developed in relation to those in the United States and provides new insights on debates between the politics of assimilation and liberation. Next, Thierry Maire (School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, EHESS) takes us to El Salvador to discuss how the Stonewall riots are remembered during Salvadoran Gay Pride. According to Maire, the event began in 1994 and had little to do with Stonewall but has grown to become a community staple over the years. Maire finds that the Stonewall riots hold various meanings to participants despite the solidified mainstream narrative and uses interviews conducted with local organizational leaders and questionnaires administered through a social network to make these conclusions. Overall, this research highlights the contradictions of LGBTQ+ memory and transnational politics. The last presentation of Workshop 3 was given by Line Chamberland (Université du Québec), where she examines what is described as the local comparison to Stonewall in Quebec. Analyzing interviews of gay, lesbian, and trans activists who have played critical roles in struggles over the last few decades, Chamberland finds both the themes of police repression and the HIV/AIDS crisis to be central. Further, Chamberland argues that “historical memory also goes hand in hand with the importance of political mobilizations” and makes connections to the production of archives and historical narratives as a vehicle for younger generations. In sum, this

workshop takes up questions of Stonewall from a global perspective, interrogating its influence—or lack thereof—from the vantage point of localized movement work.

The concluding day of the conference began with Workshop 4, “Being a Minority in LGBTQ Spaces: Creativity, Agency, and Resistance.” Florent Chossière (Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée), the first presenter, studies the relationship between asylum seekers and LGBTQ+ commercial establishments such as bars, clubs, and saunas in Paris. The presenter relies on interviews with asylum seekers and refugees as well as participant observation of an organization whose work is to assist people through the asylum process to develop her analysis. Through the framework of critical refugee studies, Chossière analyzes LGBTQ+ spaces and questions whether they should be places where people, who might migrate to France, gain access to resources. This research contributes to building knowledge of marginalized peoples within the LGBTQ+ community through an analysis of power in neoliberal and homonormative contexts. The next and final presentation of Workshop 4 was given by Alexandra Novitskaya (Stony Brook University). They draw on data from an over two-year long ethnographic and interview-based study of NYC-based grassroots organization for Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ migrants. Novitskaya finds that some community members interpreted the Stonewall riots and its early commemorations as “transformative resistance rather than [the] apolitical entertainment” found at mainstream gay pride parades today. Thus, the presenter reconceptualizes Russian-speaking LGBTQ+ migrants beyond stereotypical representations. These two presentations together examine how difference is realized in LGBTQ+ spaces and provides empirical evidence to expand knowledge on movement work outside of the United States.

Finally, Workshop 5 was titled, “Globalization of LGBTQ Activism.” Dennis Altman (La Trobe University) was the first presenter and “unashamedly” reflects on experience, scholarship, and activism in the LGBTQ+ movement over the last 50 years. Altman describes how seeing men dancing together at the Stonewall Inn a few months before the riot and traveling to places like Brazil and southeast Asia have been formative in developing a historical analysis of LGBTQ+ social movements from the last several decades. Overall, Altman finds interest in “how American modes of understanding our sexualities enter into the global imaginary” and consequently shape research and activism. Next, Mathias Quéré (Université de Toulouse) presented research on the first homosexual liberation group (GLH) in Paris, France. Grounding this analysis in organizational histories, Quéré argues it is “necessary to understand the articulation of issues of liberation with those of a more general political struggle against repression” and points out these militant-style actions break from institutional forms of changemaking, or “respectable homosexuality,” altogether. In total, analyses of various political strategies from liberation to assimilation were explored throughout the conference workshops.

The third presenter of this workshop is Alexander Kondakov (University of Helsinki). Drawing from the analysis of publications and interviews, he suggests “these materials reveal the ways in which achievements and ideas from the Western LGBTQ+ movement were reworked and remastered in Russia.” This research investigates how information regarding homosexuality entered the Soviet press in the 1970s and later inspired a more “open” LGBTQ+

movement through the 2000s. The final presentation of the conference was given by Kevin-Niklas Breu (Universität Bremen) who “critically reassesses the conflicting lines of the cross-border exchange of societal critique and protest styles that undergirded North Atlantic LGBTQ+ movements from the early 1970s onwards.” With particular attention to transnational analysis, Breu considers how LGBTQ+ subcultures disperse and transfer ideas to politicize global events. By uncentering United States LGBTQ+ movement work, the papers presented during this workshop provide differing positionalities and geographic locales to explore how LGBTQ+ activism takes shape around the world.

The conference came to a close with reflections and comments from Dennis Altman, Line Chamberland, and Karine Espinera (Université Nice-Sophia-Antipolis). For three days, scholars and activists from around the world convened in Paris—50 years after the Stonewall riots—to interrogate and honor that moment in history. The conference was especially successful for bringing together researchers from a range of disciplines to exchange and challenge ideas. What we can conclude from this conference is that despite ongoing violence and marginalization of LGBTQ+ people around the world, our rigorous attention to the past and its effects on the present provides concrete pathways for new visions of liberation in the future.