

# Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World

## Gay Communities

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The term *gay communities* is used mostly in the developed Western world and applied to urban neighborhoods or precincts with identifiable populations of men who are homosexual, that is, men whose sexual and emotional interests revolve largely around other men. The term can also be understood to include homosexual women, or lesbians; however, more recent usage would demand that the more exact term *gay and lesbian communities* be employed. The term *homosexual*, used first in 1869 to describe same-sex erotic interests, is attributed to German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert. The term *gay*, meaning “merry,” “exuberant,” or “lively,” became employed widely to describe homosexual interests during the 1960s (although, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, that usage first appeared in the early twentieth century as prison slang for young homosexual men). Gay communities today provide spaces and places in which gay men (and lesbians) can live, work, and socialize in common.

## The Birth of Gay Communities: The Stonewall Rebellion

Modern gay communities originated in older homosexual subcultures that evolved in Western cities from at least the eighteenth century. There is a difference between modern gay communities and their antecedents, however. The shift to the term *gay* dates largely from events on June 26, 1969, and subsequent days. Significant civil disobedience was perpetrated by homosexual men and transgender persons in the Greenwich Village precinct of New York City in response to yet another regular raid by New York police on bars and premises where homosexuals socialized. The Stonewall Inn was the bar in question that evening, and the raid coincided with the funeral of Judy Garland, a famous Hollywood star and chanteuse whose life and music resonated strongly with homosexual men's sensibilities.

The fact that the raid took place on the night of the funeral was more than just coincidence. Garland had a great many gay fans, and her torch-song style of music gave public expression to hidden emotions and secret situations and symbolically re-positioned marginal and subordinated experiences at the center of the artistic

mainstream. In that moment of deep collective loss, another police raid finally cracked gay men's till-then fatalistic acceptance of marginalization and subordination.

That night's events occurred against the backdrop of an era in which critique of Western culture was growing, fueled by the worldwide anti-Vietnam War movement, and civil rights and anti-racism movements in many countries, plus the advent of second-wave feminism. The flowering feminist movement produced an important critique not just of the unequal position of women in Western societies but more broadly of the social and political organization of human sexuality. A new gay liberation, or gay rights movement, was born in Greenwich Village that June, one that built on these other social movements and that quickly and similarly radicalized its political formations and processes. This longstanding connection between gay community politics and related social-reform agendas was to proceed relatively unchallenged into the mid-1990s.

The notion of gay rights also spread rapidly to other Western countries. A good example is the specific mention of sexual orientation in the equal rights section of the post-Apartheid South African constitution, reflecting the contribution of gay rights activists to that struggle.

Throughout the 1970s, riding the wave of protest and social critique, and with a growing intellectual base developed through social research and radical activism, the gay liberation movement deepened its analysis of major social discourses which, to that time, had treated same-sex erotic interests as illness, evil, antisocial, or criminal and which had led to the social marginalization and oppression of homosexual people. As the gay liberation movement grew stronger, secretive and hidden homosexual subcultures were transformed into visible and vibrant gay communities—one of the major social transformations in Western culture that marked the late twentieth century.

## An International Phenomenon

The events of June 1969 were not the only galvanizing moments in the awakening of the gay rights movement. In Australia, for example, a violent police response on June 24, 1978, to a gay rights march commemorating [p. 530 ↓ ] the Stonewall Rebellion and similar clashes in Sydney led to the now world-famous Sydney Gay

and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which became one of the world's largest and arguably most well-known celebrations of gay rights, gay and lesbian communities, and gay culture for the rest of the twentieth century. Comparable celebrations of gay pride now occur in many countries and are major annual events on gay communities' calendars. Similarly, in 1987 the introduction of Clause 28 (which bans any teaching that is seen as encouraging a gay lifestyle) into a local government amendment bill by the British government of the Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher led to a widespread, if unsuccessful, campaign against these clearly anti-homosexual laws.

For most of the 1970s and early 1980s, the focus of the gay rights movements that arose after the Stonewall Rebellion (but which had antecedents in early homophile rights movements in Europe and the United States) was on decriminalizing or legalizing sex between men. Only rarely had sex between women been acknowledged in law in any way. Seeking equal civil rights and an equal place as citizens, not just in law but also in social and cultural life, became the preoccupation of the gay community-based organizations that grew from early gay liberation ideology and activism.

Great Britain had earlier provided an important if limited lead in English-speaking countries in 1967 with the so-called Wolfenden reforms, which legalized sex between men in private. (Full equality before the law for British homosexuals is still to be achieved.)

Various European countries with legal systems derived from the Napoleonic Code had long been somewhat less restrictive and intrusive in regulating sexual behavior. A major exception was Germany (both East and West): The East retained the Nazi legal provisions against homosexual behavior until 1968, and the West initiated a partial reform in 1969 and full reform in 1994 after reunification.

However, the English-speaking world, particularly those countries that had been British colonies, inherited a more restrictive regulatory tradition, much of which is retained, for example, in Singapore and Bangladesh, where homosexual sex remains illegal. The stillunfinished gay rights struggles of the developed world are now being repeated in many developing countries, including, for example, Zimbabwe and India.

# Group Helps Gay and Lesbian Retirement Issues

LOS ANGELES (ANS)—A group called the Gay and Lesbian Association of Retiring Persons is campaigning to maintain the dignity and independence of gay and lesbian people as they age by encouraging the development of retirement communities and nursing homes specifically for them.

“Within the gay and lesbian community, there is a desire to be together,” said Mary Thorndal, executive director of GLARP. “There are Jewish retirement homes and Mormon retirement homes. We think there should be gay and lesbian retirement homes.” Thorndal said since the group was formed a year ago, several gay and lesbian retirement communities have emerged, including one complex of 35 units in Sarasota, Fla. Others are planned in Washington, Colorado, California and Massachusetts. “When we started, there weren't any that existed at all,” she said.

Thorndal said as Baby Boomers age and people begin to think about retirement, demand for gay and lesbian retirement communities is likely to surge.

“Gays and lesbians want to live together. It's especially important as they get old and approach death. They are vulnerable and not well off to deal with discrimination.” GLARP is also concerned about other implications of aging for gay and lesbian couples. No state currently gives legal recognition to gay or lesbian marriages, and as a result, when one partner is gravely ill, the other partner's wishes may not necessarily be honored, she said. Lack of formal recognition may also complicate transfer of assets in the event of one partner's death.

Meanwhile, GLARP says it has negotiated a 15 percent discount in long-term care insurance for its 500 to 1,000 members, who live in 45 states and four countries and are aged between 22 and 83 years old

“Group Helps Gays and Lesbians With Retirement Issues.” American News Service, Article No. 482, May 11, 1998.

## The Importance of Urban Life

Even before the Stonewall Rebellion and subsequent civil rights activism, certain areas or precincts of cities in many Western societies had provided safe havens or tolerant neighborhoods where there was less imposition or expectation of normative sexual behavior (largely regarded as heterosexual). Such precincts rapidly became the focus of new gay activism in the 1970s, and both a consolidation and a new visibility of those subcultures emerged. They became gay communities.

[p. 531 ↓ ] Perhaps the most famous at first, because of the Stonewall Rebellion, was Greenwich Village (or the West Village), in New York City. However, very soon the Castro in San Francisco, Oxford Street in Sydney, the inner Grachts of Amsterdam (long a place of sexual tolerance), Nollendorfplatz in West Berlin, and Church Street in Toronto, to name just some, became identified as gay areas in a very visible and even declamatory way.

These precincts were usually focused on bars, theaters, or restaurant strips, and shared space with “red light” zones that tolerated less conventional sexual lives. For example, the Oxford Street area in Sydney is built on a legacy of illegal gambling clubs, after-hours bars, drag shows (female impersonator cabarets), and was the site of a good deal of prostitution. Gay areas in other Western cities have similar, though very distinct, histories, which gay and lesbian historians have researched over the last thirty years, documenting the sources and forces that produced these sexuality-focused ghettos (as they are sometimes called) and transformed them into visible and identified gay communities.

## A Minority Politics or a Universal Challenge?

The radical politics of gay liberationists, influenced in some countries particularly by Marxism and the New Left, argued for a transformation of all societies, for an end to the sexual division between heterosexuality and homosexuality, and against the hegemony

of heterosexuality in Western culture, in its social forms and norms, and in discourses of rectitude from established religions (which saw homosexuality as a sin), modern medicine (which saw it as an illness), and the law (which regarded it as a crime). The gay challenge to human sexuality was to argue that all human beings are capable of a homoerotic response—human sexuality was polymorphously perverse (to paraphrase Freud).

The emerging gay precincts successfully achieved social visibility, becoming showcases for obvious gay lifestyles and identifiable behaviors, and providing public venues for homoerotic images (in film, art, theater, and so forth). There, one could live a gay life. Yet the precincts also had the effect of geographically confining gay men and lesbians, and political focus shifted from challenging the Western sexual order as a whole to supporting a minority way of life within the late twentieth century's increasing accommodation of social, racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity. This divergence between challenging human sexuality as a whole and establishing acceptability for a minority sexual preference was distilled in a set of opposite possibilities, as between building a gay movement on the one hand or a gay community on the other, or between seeking liberation on the one hand or living a lifestyle on the other.

## The Onset of AIDS

The development of gay communities, both as identifiable precincts and as collectivities of people recognizing one another as members of such communities, grew apace throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s amid (if sometimes ignoring) the more political debate noted above. The possible resolution of that debate was, however, derailed dramatically by the onset of a new viral epidemic: acquired immune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS.

AIDS describes the often terminal consequences of infection by the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. Gay communities in the United States were the first to see this epidemic emerge, but quickly many of the largest and well-known gay communities the world over began experiencing devastating epidemics. Although the majority of people affected by HIV/AIDS worldwide are not gay, from the early 1980s the



pandemic has remained a central concern of gay communities, as large numbers of gay men succumbed to AIDS.

It is difficult to estimate the real consequences of HIV/AIDS on gay communities in the final decades of the twentieth century. The loss of community members, political leaders, activists, intellectuals, performers, friends, sexual partners, and social networks formed before, during, and since the rise of gay politics and communities is incalculable. Yet, the pandemic also spurred activists and organizations to marshal their resources for effective use on all fronts. The world's first HIV prevention programs, its first community care and support schemes for people living with HIV/AIDS, and the first guidelines for prevention of sexual transmission of HIV ("safe sex" or "safer sex," depending on the country) were developed by gay community activists and organizations. The first gay AIDS service organization, Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, was soon emulated across the United States and Canada, in Britain and the rest of Europe, and in Australia and New Zealand. These gay community-based organizations have had remarkable success in slowing the transmission of HIV in gay communities.

It is a cruel irony that the HIV/AIDS pandemic led to [p. 532 ↓ ] the building of new processes and infrastructure in gay communities even as those communities were suffering devastating losses. Since the advent of HIV/AIDS, many countries have seen continued advances in their homosexual legal-reform agendas. Significant progress has been made in securing more open and tolerant political and cultural environments; human sexuality is increasingly understood as variable and changeable. Certainly, the gay communities that emerged intact, even buoyant and expanding in some places, show no signs of disappearing. Indeed, many have found a significant place for themselves in their societies as recognized contributors to social and economic life. Gay communities are no longer necessarily hidden or oppositional subcultures, but participating collectivities of citizens.

## But Are We Globally Gay?

Partly as a result of HIV/AIDS, and certainly accelerated by it, visibility of gay communities and political rights organizations has been increased in developing

countries. The idea of a global gay community has not, however, provided an overarching unity. Many non-Western same-sex erotic communities have challenged the use of the term *gay* as a Western imposition, preferring instead to use terms derived from their own cultures and their patterns of same-sex eroticism.

Meanwhile, in the West from the mid-1990s into the twenty-first century, the salience of gay communities has itself been challenged from within. The radical edge of early gay liberation, refracted through the experience of fighting HIV/AIDS, has been transformed into increasingly diverse forms of same-sex eroticism. Young gay people find the ghettos less appealing than did the generation who created them as safe havens. A splintering of terms to define various gender and sexual identities (bisexual, queer, transgender, intersex, for example) has undercut the utility and effectiveness of *gay* (or *gay and lesbian*) as the galvanizing cry to unity and action.

Activism has achieved varying degrees of civil rights equality, increasing tolerance (with significant exceptions in various countries and at various times), and integration into the late modern era of global economies and high consumerism. Among the contributions of gay communities to contemporary economic and social life are gay travel companies and lesbian tourist resorts, images of gay men as fashion leaders or trendsetters, the influence of gay men's dance culture on popular music, and the increasing presence of gay and lesbian themes and stories in art, theater, television and film, and marketing and advertising. In those contexts, the world's gay populations look distinctly mainstream and unexceptional, despite the fact that gay sexuality is still criminalized and persecuted in many places and is still less acceptable than "straight" sexuality. For some, gay rights have been achieved—at least, equality is nearly there. For others, there is still much to do to reach true gay liberation. Whether gay communities will remain the site in which that promise is sought and achieved is somewhat unclear.

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