

## *Gai Pied* After Ten Years: A Commercial Success, A Moral Bankruptcy?

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**SUMMARY.** In this article, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Mattias Duyves describe and analyze the development of France's most important gay magazine: *Gai Pied*. They discuss the development of this weekly publication in relation to changes that have taken place in the French homosexual movement and the broader political context in the intervening years. *Gai Pied* was the most successful innovation of the gay movement in France at the end of the seventies. Indeed, in contemporary France the gay press seems to be the only substantial organized gay "movement" outside the AIDS network. Duyvendak and Duyves ask the question whether the price *Gai Pied* has paid for becoming so centralized and dominant (more commercialized and less challenging to the readers) has been too high.

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## GAI PIED JE T'AIME

On the occasion of its seventh birthday, the French gay weekly magazine *Gai Pied* offered a seven-day trip to Greece to the winner of its love letter contest. More than 500 letters were sent in, and miracle of miracles, one of the winning letters was addressed to the magazine itself: "*Gai Pied*, je t'aime" (*Gai Pied*, I love you).

In 1989, *Gai Pied* celebrated its tenth anniversary. Was there to be a new declaration of love? No, more of an explanation of love.

Only ten years ago, amazingly late in coming about, France produced its first gay magazine directed at the gay community as well as to the outside world, *Gai Pied* (pronounced "gay peeay"). Literally meaning "Gay Foot," the magazine's name is really an elaborate pun. The French word "guepier," pronounced roughly the same way, means a "hornets' nest." The French slang expression "prendre son pied," means to have an orgasm. Put these expressions together, we produce the image of a swarm of gay people all having orgasms. But the title could also be interpreted as "on a gay footing" or "on the way with gays." The people who set up the publication certainly didn't lack imagination, although they didn't suspect that one day they would figuratively bring a hornets' nest down about their own ears too.

In 1979, *Gai Pied* started from scratch, even taking into account its professional management, its continuity, and the position it holds in its own country. Since 1982, it has been the queen of Europe's gay magazines. In France, it is the most important gay organization of the eighties.

The preparation of the soil from which *Gai Pied* would finally spring had begun shortly after May 1968. "You think that society should integrate gays, but I say that gays must disintegrate society," said Françoise d'Eaubonne, lesbian passionara of the first order, impressing this idea upon an audience of moderate lesbians and gay men in 1970. Although the rhetoric subsequently became less revolutionary in tone, gay militants and intellectuals like Guy Hocquenghem and Michel Foucault (inventor of the name *Gai Pied*) would for the rest of the decade stir up time and time again the question: "How can integration and autonomy be balanced?"

In February 1979, the activist "Groupe de Libération Homo-

sexuel" published the first issue of the new monthly *Gai Pied*. The magazine had enough gay sensibility to appeal to a host of gays tired of Mao and Marx. "Everything changed that year." The authors of the *Gay Report* exulted in 1984 that after five years *Gai Pied* had turned out to be an enormous success, a phenomenon of profound influence on gay life in France. But *Gai Pied*'s appeal was not, as they declared, that it had become the journal of the homosexual movement. On the contrary, *Gai Pied* had not become the journal of an organization, but an organization in and of itself.<sup>1</sup>

"When the idea of *Gai Pied* was launched, the gay movement was already on its last legs," one of its founders Jacky Fougeray writes in retrospect.<sup>2</sup> That's why it could be built up as an independent magazine. However, Frank Arnal, *ex-directeur de la rédaction* (editor), points out that the political gay movement at that time hadn't faded away yet, but that *Gai Pied* wrested itself from the one-dimensional conceptions of homosexuality prevailing at that time. "*Gai Pied* has completely detached itself from militancy even though the homosexual cause remains the driving force behind its development."<sup>3</sup> *Gai Pied* shows that the world of gays contained more than suffering and struggling, more than just lust and burdens. The magazine itself has emancipated the homosexual world. *Gai Pied* not only covered events, but played an active part in them as well. It bypassed the traditional homophiles of *Arcadie* magazine,<sup>4</sup> the *pédés* with their radical political identity, and the purely commercial magazines filled with clones.

*Gai Pied* broke with "gauchism" (the political radical left) for good. To the architects of *Gai Pied*, the movement of 1968 was no more than a matter of apprenticeship, not the mother church. The magazine started out with as little rubbish as baggage. It had nothing more or less to offer than its autonomy and a specific agenda that has remained its main feature: to cultivate the gay world and to inject it with culture. More than representing the gay world, *Gai Pied* reflects it. It passes on only opinions, not convictions. During the eighties the editorial staff was torn with controversy about the degree to which the magazine should politicize or commercialize. Several splits occurred. Among the losers was Jean le Bitoux, the original founder himself.

### THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

*Gai Pied* was not the only gay periodical entering the market at the end of the seventies however. *Homophonies*, the journal of the political gay organization CUARH,<sup>5</sup> also founded in 1979, gave it a try too, followed soon by *Samourai* and the more contemplative *Masques*. But in contrast to these three magazines which were forced to fold by 1986, *Gai Pied* persisted. In this way, *Gai Pied* became the magazine for French gays, its face inside to the gay world as well as to the outside world. Hence, the increased visibility of homosexuality in France must for the most part be attributed to *Gai Pied*. And then after it successfully changed from a monthly to weekly publication, *Gai Pied Hebdo* (hebdomadaire means "weekly") GPH, in 1982, obtained an almost unassailable position on the gay magazine market. That is, for as long it lasted.

Then a new communication development emerged to offer gays unprecedented possibilities for communicating among themselves without the need to resort to the personal ads (so important for sales) in magazines. This was the "minitel," a means of communication via a telephone-computer network. Thanks to its alert and energetic entrance into this new market, *Gai Pied* managed to keep its predominant position by controlling images, whether the image on the minitel screen or the printed image in the portfolio. This was an all-important step in the eighties.

Consequently, the competition from new magazines in the second half of the eighties was quickly settled. *Mec-magazine* perished in the very year of its foundation (1988) because a more militant and intellectual, less erotic appearance can no longer survive in the magazine market. Matters were different where France's biggest exploiter of the gay world—discos, saunas (baths), pornography—David Girard was concerned. His French editions of American magazines like *Honcho* and *Playguy* forced *Gai Pied* into more sex in the weekly edition itself as well as in special publications. The innocent or boring young boys posing in *Gai Pied's* soft porn publications today can no longer manage it alone. They need reinforcement from steel muscles and hard safe-sex.

But for the present *Gai Pied's* path is still strewn with roses since the organization's non-profitable elements (especially *Futur*

*Génération*, the gay broadcasting station) are compensated for by the picture periodicals, the traveler's guides, and the above-mentioned minitel. Still, an enterprise of forty employees, producing an independent weekly on sale in every newsstand in the whole of France, is vulnerable. Of necessity, circulation must stay above 30,000 because only then does the French law on freedom of press and distribution guarantee that nationwide distribution will take place, if need be with government support. Without this national network to attract readers, *Gai Pied* probably couldn't survive as a weekly.

### PERFORMER

The magazine's contents roughly fall under the headings of coverage of the value of the readers' lifestyle, developments within the international gay world, and the position of the gay world within French society. Key elements are lifestyles based on individual freedom, a diverse gay world, and France. *Gai Pied* approaches the reader more as a performer than as a consumer. It addresses the major events of the gay lifestyle, like the breakthrough of gay isolation and anonymity, coming out, cruising, going out, risks concerning health and violence, interest in changes in the gay scene and the subcultural offerings of theaters, discos, books, fashion, and other activities. The editorial formula serves to enable the reader to come forward with his own modes of style on his own initiative. He can express himself in various ways: in self-written pornographic stories, on a regular page with the highlights of the week's gay life, in contact ads, in readers' mail, and in written portraits of other readers. The first page always contains the results of the weekly polls and the mini-inquiry about some subject collected by minitel. The appreciation of the readers' own performance advances their commitment to the magazine, stresses their interactive membership of a segment of the population generally invisible, and is above all lucrative for the magazine.

The success of this formula is closely related to the ability of the editorial staff to offer a heterogeneous representation of gay life. But even here the results are unsatisfactory. For after their coming

out, the readers of *Gai Pied* seem to stay eternally young; the middle-aged gay is almost completely invisible in the magazine. Although older gays make up 16 percent of all readers, they are seen as a "quantité négligeable." *Gai Pied* also lacks any initiative in the field of gay studies. The heading "Gai Savoir" (Gay Knowledge) in the back holds at best an easy-to-swallow summary of French books. The magazine doesn't burn its fingers on literary surveys.

*Gai Pied*'s success lies in its ability to absorb its readers' lifestyles; the fact that these are so differentiated, sometimes almost incompatible, is its challenge. While part of its readership consists of gays who have to come out of their isolation time and time again because they keep shrinking back into invisibility, another part is made up of gays who don't give a rap about a disguised existence, but who use *Gai Pied* to keep informed and to express their preferences. The closeted group hardly wants to be a member of *Gai Pied*'s public. The editors aren't much helped by the fact that the typical *Gai Pied* reader roughly resembles the average Frenchman, even though its public is made up of relatively more men in their twenties, thirties, and forties (more than 60 percent), of more professionals and men with a higher education (almost 60 percent), and of more readers from rural areas and small towns than other French weeklies have.

Over the past years, surveys have shown that 55 percent of its public wants *Gai Pied* to maintain a strictly neutral, objective approach toward French politics. Less than half of the readers would prefer a left-wing government, whereas almost a third would prefer a government that keeps to the middle of the road. Not even 25 percent takes liberalization of legislation on sex with minors to be a primary requisite; they want an official policy that leaves no room for moralizing either by the church or the state. For more than 75 percent of the readers this policy should be aimed exclusively at guarantees of their individual freedom, an anti-discriminatory policy regarding the labor market, family law, and AIDS health care. *What they want most is a further banalization of gay life. The readers want to belong to a gay world that is essentially a part of France. Hence the big interest in lifestyles. Social change? They want something that's a lot more fun!*

If *Gai Pied* doesn't want to lose its readers' good will, it has to

consider very carefully not only them, but even the non-readers. This is the conclusion of sociologist Michael Pollak.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the image *Gai Pied* paints of the gay world is rather tepid, though varied. The magazine carefully keeps an uneasy balance between eroticizing, politicizing, and commercializing its contents.

Therefore the cover, that serves to draw fresh attention, to kindle curiosity, and to seduce potential buyers, necessarily is the result of a number of compromises: not too sexy, not too cultured, not too radical, not too alternative, not too boyish, not too oldish, not too social, not *too gay* . . . These are the compromises the editors observe in order to keep catering to their heterogeneous public. This is unfortunate because while sales continue on up automatically, originality pretty soon gets lost.

An editorial staff that embraces its audience doesn't have to let itself get hugged to death. It sometimes seems as if after ten years of success, *Gai Pied* has forgotten this. The editors have begun to pander to the reader instead of challenging him to a mutual performance.

### IN THE COMBAT ZONE

The linked-up sexualization and commercialization of the gay press hasn't gone unnoticed by the outer world. Beautiful torsos cover the French newsstands; kids lose their innocence buying a newspaper. It's here that part of the moral right has drawn the line and to almost everybody's amazement and outrage in 1987 Secretary Pasqua threatened to suppress *Gai Pied*. Never before had the extraordinary position of *Gai Pied* in and outside of the gay community become clearer. The ban on *Gai Pied* was seen as a frontal attack on gays themselves and the resultant protest was enormous and effective. According to one opinion sample, almost two thirds of the French turned against the ban; irrespective of age or political preference, a majority opposed this oppressive measure.<sup>7</sup> Thereupon Pasqua dropped his plan. The Parisian streets were to remain full of titillating pictures.

The growing tolerance is not only the result of *Gai Pied*'s ten years of imperturbable informing and publishing; its very existence is the fruit of earlier transformations in French society. For a deter-

mination of its historical place it's extremely illuminating to read how former enemies now want to join as best friends. Even the puritan communists, who during the seventies tried to exclude the "pédés" from their labor day parades, stress how they have always been misunderstood when the questions of "morals" is brought up.<sup>8</sup>

*Gai Pied* has kept on trying to keep clear from this minefield of French party politics. Frank Arnal once said: "If conformism must be seen as a trait of the right and criticism as a characteristic of the left, well, then *Gai Pied* is kind of leftist." Don't you believe it!

As politics started to meddle again with everything affecting gay life, particularly because of AIDS, *Gai Pied* was forced to take a stand too. And at this moment it became clear how fundamentally the gay world had changed. No longer was there any organization to climb the barricades. What's more, the barricades themselves had been prematurely cleared away. Gays were hardly even "in motion" any more, perhaps because of the apparent disappearance of the need for them. All of a sudden, *Gai Pied* stood in the front line, as much to inform and mobilize the gay community as to confront the rather angry outer world. Only recently have new allies come into being in the form of auxiliary organizations (AIDES for example) as well as a parliamentary gay organization like the "Gais pour la liberté," with whom the magazine stays on friendly terms, possibly because of its close ties with the Socialist Party.

In an inner and outer world in transformation, *Gai Pied* remains upright, in solidarity with its readers, alert to the rapid changes in its popularity. The question remains whether the editors go along too far with their public's whims in taste. Would it not be possible for the utopian pearl diver of 1979 to become the swineherd of 1999?

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Duyvendak is doing research on new social movements in the eighties, especially in France. Duyves was one of the founders of the gay-studies department at the faculty of social sciences. Presently, he is working on urbanism and homosexuality at the University of Utrecht. This article was written in 1990, largely prior to the disappearance of *Gai Pied* in 1992. Correspondence may be addressed to: Graduate School of Social Sciences (PdIS), Oude Hoogstraat 24, 1012 CE, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

#### NOTES

1. *Rapport Gai*, Enquete sur les modes de vie homosexuels, Cavaillhes (ed.), Persona, Paris, 1984 (*Gay Rapport*, Survey of different kinds of homosexual life).
2. *Masques*, no. 25-26, Années 1980, Mythe ou liberation, p. 100, In: La presse gay: redaction ou fonds of commerce? by J. Fougeray.
3. *Masques*, no. 25-26, Années 1980, Mythe ou liberation, p. 83, In: *Gai Pied Hebdo*: à l'origine de la visibilité homosexuelle, by F. Arnal.
4. *Arcadie* is a homosexual organization, founded after the Second World War, that until its disappearance at the beginning of the eighties propagated a strategy of "adaptation."
5. The CUARH (Comité d'Urgence Anti-Repression Homosexuelle) was the last political umbrella organization to rise in 1979. It faded away silently in 1986.
6. All of these data about *Gai Pied*'s readers come from surveys conducted by Michael Pollak, among which is "GPH, la presse homosexuelle, ses lecteurs et non-lecteurs," 1987.
7. Figures from IPSOS/*Gai Pied* survey: "Les Français et l'interdiction d'un journal homosexuel," 25 March 1987.
8. *GPH* no. 216, 25 April 1986, "7 ans de passion."

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