May 6th, 12:00 AM

San Francisco Gay Bars: Challenging Exploitation and Increasing Activism

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Recommended Citation
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Historically, San Francisco gay bars have experienced many barriers to the public organizing of gays and lesbians. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s the city saw waves of police crackdowns on queer public spaces with gay bars often as the main targets. San Francisco gay bars were one of the few places gays and lesbians could congregate in public while still having the privacy and sense of security to interact with the same sex. During the early 1960s, following decades of abuses by local authorities, the city’s gay and lesbian community responded by increasing their political and social activism to fight for their civil rights.

Now that I have established the framing, I will spend the rest of the presentation detailing the consequences of the San Francisco Police Department’s (SFPD) regulation of gay bars and analyze how these consequences impacted the civil rights of gays and lesbians from 1960 to 1965. Ultimately, I argue that the SFPD’s regulation of gay bars created a campaign of surveillance and harassment that led to the extortion of bar owners and targeted arrests of queer people. The acts of the SFPD engendered increased social and political activism in local gay and lesbian communities that challenged the oppressive sociopolitical structures of the time. To support my argument, I discuss various laws, police raids, and people of prominence during the early 1960s. Some of the sources I include are periodicals of San Francisco gay and lesbian organizations, firsthand experiences of queer people in San Francisco during the 1960s and newspaper articles. These sources all offer considerable insight into the SFPD’s role in policing gay bars and the response of the gay and lesbian community.

There were several main characteristics of the SFPD's regulation of gay bars. One example of this is the "gayola" scandal where SFPD officers would take money from bar owners in exchange for allowing the bar to stay open, or sometimes the SFPD officers provided insider
information on when raids were scheduled. Eventually this practice came to an end once newspapers like the *San Francisco Chronicle* started exposing the officers who demanded money and new forms of regulation arose. This includes entrapment where police officers would go undercover into bars and arrest people for making a pass at them or for same-sex dancing or any other "lewd behavior." The SFPD had substantial discretionary authority in determining which behaviors and actions could be considered lewd, sometimes with simply same-sex flirting resulting in arrests.

After the “gayola” scandal of 1960, the policing methods of the SFPD changed. As argued by Nan Alamilla Boyd in *Wide-Open Town*, the SFPD started to work with the Alcoholic Beverage and Control Board (ABC). These two entities employed vague laws and court cases to justify the regulation of gay bars. For example, loitering laws legalized single men walking by themselves or being in the street without a distinct reason. Police officers had the right to ask anybody wandering in the street to justify his presence with an acceptable explanation. Loitering laws and other vagrancy laws were used to specifically target gay men to reduce the prevalence of cruising and sociality.

In an interview with Everett Erlandson, former Naval Service member Otto Bremerman relayed his firsthand experiences with the targeting of gay men, such as during weekend trips to San Francisco and during his time as an active member in the homophile movement. As a young gay man, Bremerman was hesitant to go into the bars because of how frequently they were raided. When reflecting on his time in San Francisco and going to gay bars, Bremerman said, “you took your life into your hands when you went into a bar.” Bremerman’s perspective echoes the experiences of many gays and lesbians during the early 1960s. They were systematically
policed at gay bars so that there would be limitations on queer visibility in San Francisco. Ultimately, the ABC enforced laws aimed to discourage homosexual inclusion in San Francisco.

Another illustrative example of the SFPD’s use of discretionary authority is exemplified by the Tay-Bush Inn raid in 1961, the largest bar raid in SF history. The Tay-Bush Inn was raided because it was a popular gay bar, and in one night the SFPD vice squad organized a raid that resulted in the arrest of 103 people. According to the police officers, the people inside the establishment engaged in “lewd, indecent acts” that warranted their arrests.

Quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle’s article titled, “Big Sex Raid --- Cops Arrest 103,” Bob Johnson, owner of Tay-Bush Inn, claimed that the people were “‘booked on phony charges’” and the police officers “‘were very sassy toward them – real rude.’” These quotes show how differently people viewed gays and lesbians in the early 1960s. Policemen were concerned with the prevalence of same-sex dancing in the bar and arrested people for “lewd” interactions with someone of the same sex. Johnson was concerned with how his customers were being treated and thought that the police officers were abusing their power. The SFPD targeted the Tay-Bush Inn because of its clientele, and undercover officers staked out the location for three days before the raid occurred. The arrests and raid were premeditated decisions to punish the gay and lesbian community for their same-sex affiliations. There were few laws that protected the rights of gays and lesbians and the police had a lot of authority in determining legal versus illegal behavior.

These forms of regulation, along with many others, impacted San Francisco's gay and lesbian population in many ways. The SFPD denied the gay and lesbian community the right to assembly by targeting gay bars. The gay bars were under surveillance by the SFPD and were raided by the cops so frequently that on average a gay bar only remained open for one year. Gay
bars were targeted because they had a large gay and lesbian clientele. Entrapment and surveillance were not problems in bars considered to have a lot of heterosexual people, so there was unequal enforcement of law, as well as unequal treatment. There were also issues with police harassment where some police officers, such as Arthur Gerrens, would search some individuals up to ten times in a two-month period. He was described as brutal, rude and overbearing and there were multiple complaints filed against him.

Ultimately, the SFPD erected barriers to queer people’s public presence and sociality, as well as infringed on their rights to assembly. The campaign of surveillance and targeted arrests of gays and lesbians from 1960 to 1965 elicited a strong response from the gay and lesbian community. They became more organized and created new groups to combat the injustices they experienced such as the Society for Individual Rights (SIR), Citizens Alert, the Tavern Guild and the Council of Religion and the Homosexual (CRH). Already established groups such as the Daughters of Bilitis increased the political dimensions of their organizations by starting to publicly condemn the SFPD. They circulated periodicals and opinion pieces that spoke out against the discriminatory practices. Existing gay and lesbian organizations compiled reports against police officers, wrote letters to the Police Chief and wrote editorials critiquing the SFPD.

One of the most influential organizations was the Tavern Guild, which was founded in direct response to the SFPD regulation of gay bars. In “Lest We Forget,” a condensed history of the Tavern Guild created by its members, it discusses the owners’ and bartenders’ dreams to “enjoy equal rights under the constitution” instead of being denied the freedom of assembly. The Tavern Guild organized to fight the unjust existence, enforcement and effects of discriminatory laws. To combat the regulation of gay bars, the Tavern Guild adopted a few forms of resistance. They circulated pictures of undercover agents and created a phone tree so that bars would know
which places had been harassed by the police. Additionally, the group paid lawyer fees for people arrested in gay bars and invited politicians to their weekly meetings. The Tavern Guild developed new ways to avoid closures and spread public awareness about issues particular to the gay and lesbian community, leading them to partner with other organizations that advocated for the rights of gays and lesbians and increasing queer visibility.

An analysis of the regulation of gay bars from 1960 to 1965 reveals a sustained campaign of extortion, surveillance, harassment and unequal treatment by the SFPD. As a result, the civil and human rights of the local gay and lesbian community were suppressed. They were unable to freely assemble, were subjected to targeted abuse and disproportionately impacted by certain laws. The consequences of the SFPD’s regulation of gay bars prompted a rise in political and social activism in gay and lesbian communities. New organizations were created in response to the acts of the SFPD so that the gay bars and their patrons would be protected from further mistreatment. These organizations championed the dignity and humanity of gays and lesbians to assert their right to an equal status in society. Ultimately, the regulation of San Francisco gay bars infringed upon the civil rights and freedoms of gays and lesbians. Consequentially, there was an increase in social and political activism in which the gay and lesbian organizations openly criticized the exploitative power of the SFPD. The gay and lesbian community united against its oppressors to fight for the rights and liberties they had been systematically denied.