UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

School of History and Philosophy

ARTS2190: Protest & Memory

Major Essay

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QUESTION: ***Protest Movements cannot succeed without mobilising and engaging some portion of the public. Are they transformed in the process? Compare and contrast the goals and outcomes of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. You may answer this question by using primary and secondary sources to show how Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has changed since the 1970s*** **(independent research topic).**

Twentieth century Australia was a period of intense transformation of the 'norms' by which Australians lived. The social, cultural and political identities of many Australians were shaped and reshaped through movements, such as those for civil rights, during this time. Protest movements are a major contributing factor to the reconfiguration of identity politics and national rhetoric in Australia. Some argue that a key feature of successful protest movements is the supportive mobilisation of some portion of the public.[1] The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras' success as a form of protest will be evaluated throughout the essay by comparing and contrasting its goals and outcomes since its inception in 1978. By analysing Mardi Gras posters, this essay will also show how the festival has changed, since 1978, from a political demonstration advocating for the civil rights of homosexual people to a globally-known month-long celebration and tourist consumption festival of queer lifestyles and culture.

The first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras was held on Saturday 24th June 1978 to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the Stonewall Riot. The Stonewall Riot took place on 28th June 1969 when New York City police officers launched a 'routine' raid on the Stonewall Inn, a Greenwich Village Gay Bar.[2] The bar's normally compliant customers took a stand and fought back, clashing with police, causing a riot. The Stonewall rebellion came to represent a new wave of open defiance of the heteronormative society. The patrons of the Stonewall Inn, by fighting back against repeated police brutality, had sent influential shock waves around the world, sparking other gay and lesbian liberation movements globally.[3] After Stonewall, queer people around the world began to mobilise strongly, protesting for their civil rights. In Sydney, homosexuals experienced cultural invisibility and legal discrimination. Their consenting sexual relations were criminalised and policed[4]. Sydney's first Mardi Gras was the culminating event in a day of political action, staged as a part of the International Day of Gay Solidarity, which included a march and a public meeting.[5] The purpose of the first Mardi Gras protest was not only to commemorate the Stonewall Riot, but

also, as Stacey Johnston, a 1978 participant, remembers clearly, a campaign protesting to "Repeal all Anti-Homosexual Laws and Stop Police Harassment of Homosexuals."[6]

The 1978 Mardi Gras' public display of homosexuality was advertised as a festival (Figure 1) during a time when male homosexual acts were illegal in New South Wales.[7] A massive crowd, estimated to have been between 1,500 and 2,000 revellers, peacefully paraded down Oxford Street from Taylor Square to Hyde Park, singing, dancing and chanting.[8] But when the crowd moved up William Street, towards Kings Cross, police headed off the parade, causing a violent confrontation. What ensued was a riot, 'Australia's very own Stonewall'.[9] Participants, such as Rick Dowdle, describe it as 'the most terrifying experience of my life. All mayhem broke loose'.[10] The atmosphere was a violent political craziness. Lee Franklyn reported in *Campaign* that 'People screamed as the streets exploded into violence'.[11] This violent public police harassment ensured a repeat demonstration in 1979.

When comparing the 1978 Mardi Gras parade with the present month-long Mardi Gras festival, one can see how much the annual event has changed. The changing nature of the Mardi Gras, from peaceful political demonstration to an event of celebration and consumption, is particularly evident in and traceable through the posters that advertise the festival each year. By analysing the shifting style of the posters' designs and themes, one can map how the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has developed since 1978 in three broad stages; late 1970s, 1980s, and late 1980s-early 1990s to present.

In the first three years of the Mardi Gras, from 1978 to 1980, posters were produced in the style of political handbills, emphasising the serious commemorative and protest nature of the demonstrations.[12] These posters, filled with information about each day's events, were quite bland (Figure 1 and Figure 2). However, they also incorporate the dominant imagery of the 'coming out' butterfly, highlighting a balance between political and social goals which characterised of the first three Mardi Gras.[13] In the late 1970s, Sydney's gay men and lesbians were an invisible minority. Visibility of homosexual lifestyle, culture and issues in a dominant heteronormative society, therefore, became a powerful tactic and clear goal of the first and subsequent Mardi Gras.

Camp activist, Mike Clohesy commented in 1978 that 'Public demonstrations of our homosexuality are necessary, whether we walk down the street or go on television'.[14] It was this first mobilisation of a significant number of participants, and the violence in which it ended, which caused the first Mardi Gras to be named as a successful symbolic beginning to the movement for homosexual equality. It was, as Leigh Raymond describes it, 'the necessary transforming moment, which galvanises and energises a people and a culture, and which makes great things possible'.[15]

Public celebrations became crucial to articulating gay pride around Australia in the 1980s[16]. Of course, public displays of homosexuality and celebration of gay and lesbian culture in Sydney was a key political tactic used in the first three Mardi Gras' to campaign for the right to be visible. But in the 1980s, the idea of celebrating gay and lesbian culture began to dominate over the idea of a political protest. By 1981, there was an agreement that the Mardi Gras would be moved to summer to encourage more participant and spectator involvement. This rescheduling epitomised the steadily changing style of the Mardi Gras, with a subtle shift away from directly commemorating the anniversary of the Stonewall Riot and towards celebration.[17] A summer festival would help demonstrate the gay community's size and diversity and claim homosexuals' right to celebrate in the streets.[18]

This transformation could be attributed partly to achievements of significant but limited equal rights in the 1980s. By mid-1980s, homosexual rights had taken two major steps towards full legal equality. In 1982, homosexuality was included as a ground for action under the *Anti-Discrimination Act* (NSW) and two years later, in 1984, anti-homosexual laws had been abolished in New South Wales through the decriminalisation of consensual homosexual acts.[19] Sydney's homosexuals had finally achieved some of the legal and political goals set out in the 1978 Mardi Gras.

Mardi Gras posters from the 1980s reflect this shift towards a largely celebratory agenda. Posters, specifically those from 1983 (Figure 3), 1984 (Figure 4) and 1987 (Figure 5) use bright, flamboyant colours and a style that reflects, as Robert Swieca notes, an '[evolution] into more relaxed expressions of hedonistic enjoyment', a mixture of soft protest and celebration.[20] The organisers and participants, having achieved some legal equality, seemed to be focused on social goals, attempting to infiltrate mainstream interest and influence wider public opinion about homosexuals and their right to equality. Peter Murphy, an

original Mardi Gras participant, put it simply: 'the commercial gays had taken it over from the politicos'.[21]

From the late 1980s and into the millennium, the Mardi Gras' attendance numbers had been growing appreciably. Spectator crowd numbers for the parade - both homosexual and heterosexual observers- had been growing since the early 1980s, emphasising a gradual, but growing heterosexual acceptance, or at least tolerance, of homosexual lifestyle and culture. In one year, between 1983 and 1984, parade attendance doubled from 20,000 to 40,000.[22] The present crowd attendances, however, have stretched well into the hundreds of thousands, emphasising the increasing popularity of Mardi Gras for both homosexuals and heterosexuals, showing that gay rights are not a fringe concern.[23]

By the 1990s, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras had been transformed into a cultural extravaganza of national importance with an international reputation[24]. While the first Mardi Gras was aimed at addressing the political issues and demands of the local Sydney queer population, the Mardi Gras of the last two decades, has had to deal with the competing demands of the local queer constituency and the commercial interests of sponsors and the global gay and lesbian tourism industry.

The Mardi Gras' increased commercialism can be attributed to, in part, the festival's relationship with tourism. Kevin Markwell argues that while the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is a uniquely Australian version of 'gay pride parades',[25] since the early 1990s it has been inextricably framed within a global gay and lesbian tourism industry that demands spectacle, consumption of experience, and that requires considerable corporate sponsorship.[26] The Mardi Gras poster from 2001 (Figure 6) expresses this relationship with tourism, advertising the metaphorical painting of Sydney as a gay and lesbian city designed for consumption. This apparent movement away from its community-based, grassroots constituency has caused the Mardi Gras to be criticised at times for forgetting and/or not maintaining its original political dimensions in balance with its celebratory demands.

Graham Carbery believes, however, that the present Mardi Gras still has a serious purpose, as it did in 1978, although the political style is very different.[27] The mobilisation and visibility of a large portion of the public, both homosexual and heterosexual, not only emphasises the festival's popularity, but at the same time affirms the rights of homosexuals

to take their place in society openly and without apology.[28] The poster from 2005 (Figure 7), shows that Sydney's queer community is still fighting for their equality and freedom, even if it is seen in a commercial sense.

There is clear evidence that, even though highly commercialised, the Mardi Gras still achieves strategic social progress. The need to actively seek out corporate sponsorship has given Mardi Gras organisers the opportunity to advocate and achieve, to an extent, the end of workplace discrimination of homosexuals, an objective of the 1978 Mardi Gras.[29] All corporate sponsors are chosen selectively. They must recognise same-sex relationships through domestic spousal benefits and must include sexual orientation in their corporate anti-discrimination statements to be eligible to sponsor the Mardi Gras.[30]

Steven M. Kates argues that the Mardi Gras' 'spectacle', its carnivalesque style and ability to visualise and mobilise the queer community, does not take away from the original protest nature of the festival, but is a political statement in itself.[31] Carnivalesque festivals centre on symbolic inversion, seeking to contradict aspects of the social status quo.[32] The infamous Mardi Gras parade in particular provides opportunities to highlight contemporary political issues, in a carnivalesque style. Mardi Gras participants are exceptionally effective in their use of visual metaphor in the form of themes, floats and costumes, to stress these issues.[33] Politics is an ever-present theme. Each year marchers focus on different institutional and social inequalities, with mockery of religious and political figures appearing often.[34]

While some claim that the Mardi Gras, through its visibility, has attracted extensive publicity and has thus become a major influence on public opinion, others believe that public visibility does not necessarily constitute social progress.[35] Kevin Markwell argues that the Mardi Gras has the ability to 'temporally contain' gay and lesbian issues, whereby these issues are given inadequate coverage outside the Mardi Gras period. The parade in particular may also conceal oppression, homophobia and discrimination under a mask of flamboyant celebration.[36]

However, it is the power of this visibility and mobilisation that allows the queer community to suspend control of the dominant culture, resulting in the dramatic, carnivalesque expression of queer culture on the streets.[37] Ignatius Jones sums this up well: 'We didn't need to make a political statement. Mardi Gras *was* a political statement. Our very survival

was a political statement, and the fact that such a large chunk of the straight world would regularly join us in celebrating *us*, was a great *social* statement'.[38]

To conclude, it is possible to suggest that mobilisation of a portion of the public is key to a successful protest. Each year, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has involved increasing levels of active community participation in and engagement with addressing a particular problem or issue.[39] Never have homosexuality, the gay and lesbian community and their issues, been more visible or more seriously dealt with by the mainstream, or more entrenched in social and political life.[40] Today the Mardi Gras has been transformed into one of the biggest celebrations of gay and lesbian culture in the world, yet it is still representative of a fight against the heteronormative society.[41]A viable gay and lesbian community has thrived over the thirty-two years of the Mardi Gas festival. The public spectacle of the Mardi Gras opens up a space for discourse about sexuality, identity and sexual practice.[42] The annual Mardi Gas not only transformed the lives and identities of gays and lesbians, but also the society in which they live. The continuation of the Mardi Gras and its mainstream media coverage since the 1994 ABC broadcast are indicators of societal tolerance of homosexuality.[43] This tolerance can be seen in the change of attitudes of New South Wales Police Service. Police officers, who were once fighting against Mardi Gras participants (Figure 8), now march alongside them annually in the parade, to show their support[44] (Figure 9). Although the Mardi Gras has achieved a significant number of its goals, Australian gays and lesbians are still vilified in society and discriminated against within the law.[45] The Mardi Gras poster from 2010, 'History of the World' (Figure 10) is a reminder of the transformation and success of the annual festival, but also of the continuing battle for full equality for homosexual Australians.

Endnotes

1. L. Leonard and M. Pelling, (2010) 'Mobilisation and protest: environmental justice in Durban, South Africa', *Local Environment*, 15: 2, p. 137-151.
2. R. Swieca, 'An overview of the politics and history of the parade', in R. Sweica, J.O'Callaghan, G. Jones (eds.), *Absolutely Mardi Gras: Costume & Design of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, (Haymarket, Sydney: Powerhouse Publishing & Doubleday, 1997), p. 2.
3. See M. Cruikshank, *The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 69, and M. F. Manalansan IV, (1995) 'In the shadows of Stonewall: examining gay transnational politics and diasporic dilemna', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 2: 4, p. 428-438.

[4.] M. Flood and C. Hamilton, 'Mapping Homophobia in Australia', in S. Robinson (eds.) *Homophobia: An Australian History* (Leichhardt, Sydney: The Federation Press, 2008), p. 17.
[5.] G. Carbery, *A History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, (Parkville, Victoria: Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 1995), p. 11.
[6.] S. Johnston quoted in R. Cook, *Closets are for clothes: A History of Queer Australia*, (Fitzroy, Victoria: Black Dog Books, 2010), p. 89.
[7.] K. Markwell, (2002) 'Mardi Gras Tourism and the Construction of Sydney as an International Gay and Lesbian City', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 8: 1-2, (p. 81-99), p. 81-83.
[8.] B. Haire, 'Mardi Gras', in C. Johnston and P. Van Reyk (eds.), *Queer City: Gay and Lesbian politics in Sydney*, (Annandale, Sydney: Pluto Press Australia Ltd, 2001), (p. 97-111), p. 99.
[9]. See G. Willett, *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*, (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2000), p. 20; P. Van Reyk, 'Listen Up! Lighten Up! A Singer's perspective on Sydney Activism pre-1990', in C. Johnston and P. Van Reyk (eds.), *Queer City: Gay and Lesbian politics in Sydney*, (Annandale, Sydney: Pluto Press Australia Ltd, 2001), (p.1-16), p. 2.
[10.] R. Dowdle (1997), quoted in G. Harris, J. White and K. Davis, *New Day Dawning: The Early Years of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, (Sydney: Pride History Group, 2008), p. 12.
[11.] 'Rage: Cops attack Sydney Marchers – 53 Jailed', by Lee Franklyn, *Campaign*, No. 34, July 1978, p. 7-8. Cited in G. Carbery, p. 12.
[12.] Swieca, p. 23.
[13]. Swieca, p. 6.
[14]. M. Clohesy (1978), quoted in G. Harris, J. White and K. Davis, *New Day Dawning: The Early Years of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*, (Sydney: Pride History Group, 2008), p. 10.
[15]. L. Raymond, quoted in R. Swieca, p. 6.
[16.] M. Arrow, *Friday on our minds: Popular Culture in Australia since 1945*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), p. 182.
[17]. Willett, p. 202.
[18.] Harris, White and Davis, p. 16.
[19]. I. Marsh and L. Galbraith, (1995) 'The political impact of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 30: 2, (p. 300-320), p. 305.
[20]. Swieca, p. 6
[21]. P. Murphy, *Building up to Sydney's first gay and lesbian Mardi Gras*, (oral history, transcribed). Found online at 'Vintage Reds: Australian stories of rank and file organising', <http://roughreds.com/twopdf/murphy.pdf> 1 October 2010.
[22]. Carbery, p. 39.
[23]. ibid.
[24.] Carbery, p. 5.
[25.] Markwell, p. 85.
[26]. Markwell, pp. 81,85.
[27]. Carbery, p. 5.
[28]. ibid.
[29]. Cook, p. 88.
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[31]. Kates, p. 7.
[32]. B. A. Babcock (eds.), 'The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1978), in S. M. Kates, (2005) 'Producing and Consuming Gendered Representations: An Interpretation of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras', C*onsumption Markets and Culture*, 6: 1, (p. 5-22), p. 7.
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[35]. Marsh and Galbraith, p. 310.
[36]. Markwell, p. 83 & 89.
[37]. Swieca, p. 21.
[38]. I. Jones, quoted in R. Wherrett (eds.) *Mardi Gras – True Stories: From Lock up to Frock up*, (Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin Books Australia Ltd., 1999), p. 240.
[39.] Leonard and Pelling, p. 138.
[40.] Willett, p. 238.

[41]. M. Daly, *Rough Guide to Australia*, (Rough Guides, 2003), p. 182.
[42]. Haire, p. 103.
[43]. See Marsh and Galbraith, p. 313 and Kates, p. 17.
[44]. Markwell, p. 94.
[45]. Cook, p. 110.

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Appendix

Figure 1: 1978 Mardi Gras Poster

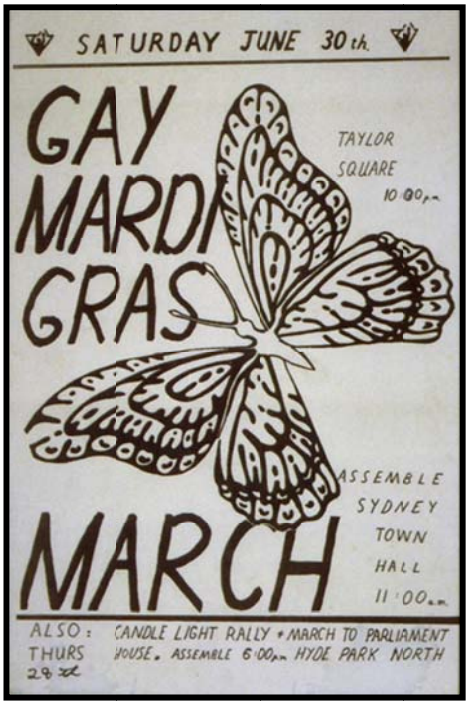

Figure 2: 1979 Mardi Gras Poster

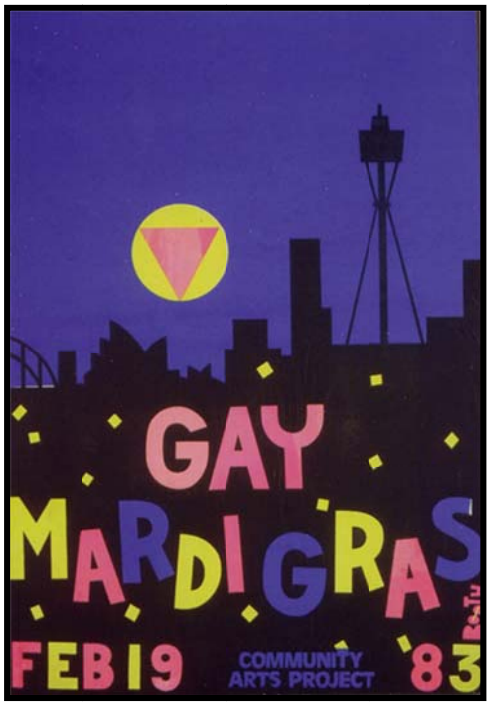

Figure 3: 1983 Mardi Gras Poster

(Alan Booth Design)

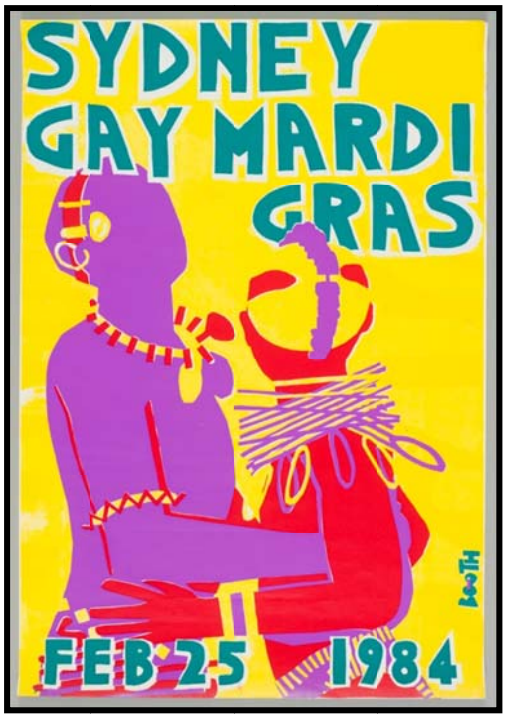

Figure 4: 1984 Mardi Gras Poster

(Alan Booth Design)

Figure 5: 1987 Mardi Gras Poster

(Michael Fenaughty Design)

Figure 6: 2001 Mardi Gras Poster

Figure 7: 2005 Mardi Gras Poster

Figure 8: NSW Police Officers attack Mardi Gras Participants, 1978 (John Sefton Picture)

Figure 9: NSW Police Officers march in 2006 Mardi Gras (Wendy Wilson Picture)

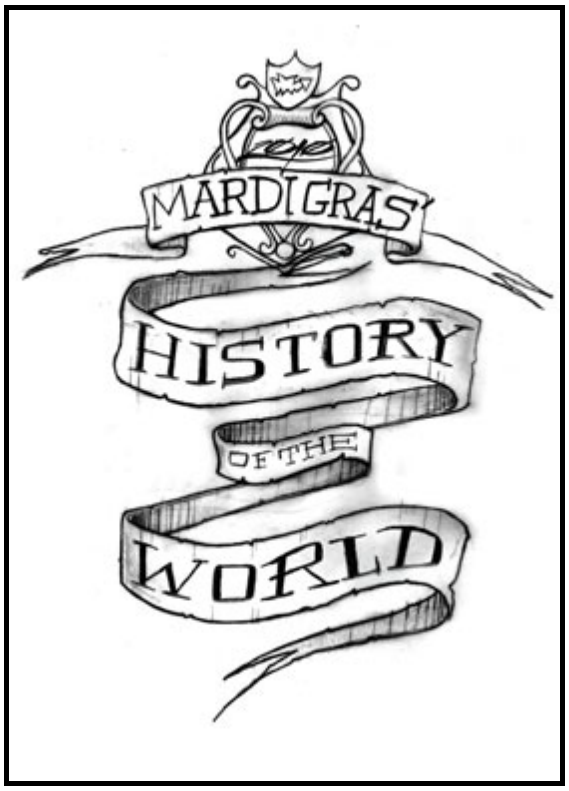

Figure 10: 2010 Mardi Gras Poster

Sources

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, & 7: Can all be found online at <http://www.pinkboard.com.au/history/mardigras/> 14 October 2010

Figure 8: John Sefton Picture, found online at <http://www.news.com.au/features/gallery-e6frflf0-1111120003222?page=12> 14 October 2010

Figure 9: Wendy Wilson Picture, found online at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/dita2711/107619462/in/photostream/> 14 October 2010

Figure 10: 2010 Mardi Gras Poster found online at: <http://www.mardigras.org.au/mardi-gras-2010/parade/index.cfm>