

Luxury and gay identity in Sitges: memory, tourism and carnival

Oscar Guasch, University of Barcelona (oscarguasch@ub.edu)

Josep María Mesquida, University of Barcelona (jmesquida@ub.edu)

Jordi Caïs, University of Barcelona (jcais@ub.edu)

Abstract

This article analyses the Spanish seaside resort of Sitges and its historical identity as a destination for gay tourism. The article focuses on the contribution of the carnival to the construction of Sitges as a world-class "gay village". From the carnival it is possible to observe the processes of integration of the local gay community of Sitges in the gay globality associated with identity consumption and international gay tourism. Carnival celebrations are the pivot around which we can order and better understand these processes through three chronologically successive identity periods: pre-gay, gay, and post-gay. Throughout these identity periods, carnival has provided a backdrop for negotiation and conflict between competing demands and interests: residents who view Sitges as a luxury residential neighbourhood, the demands of the gay communities, and the interests of the gay and lesbian tourism industry. We will also show that the way in which Sitges treats its gay citizens has been and still is complicated and somewhat contradictory. Carnival is an ideal setting to bring some of these contradictions into sharper focus.

Introduction

Sitges is a small coastal town on the western Mediterranean frequented by the upper classes of the city of Barcelona where some of the first forms of gay identity in Spain appear early. Close to 30,000 people currently reside in this town, near Barcelona, and it has become the most expensive place to live in Spain, and at the same time, the most famously gay-friendly town in the country. Moreover, Sitges is an unmissable tourist destination for the Spanish and international gay community. This article explains the process by which gay identity developed in this exclusive, luxury town.¹

By studying Sitges, we can observe changes in gay identities, in the context of relations between the local and the global, mediated by tourism. In the 1980s, the interaction between local gay forms and the burgeoning gay tourist market made Sitges a legendary destination for international gay tourism. And over the following decade, Sitges became Spain's testing and stomping ground for the new leisure and recreation model associated with gay identity. In the 21st century, Sitges is a showcase for the manifestations

¹ This article is part of the project "Gay tourist destinations in Spain: Identity, globalisation, and the market", financed by the Ministry of Science and Innovation (PGC2018-095910-B-100).

of gay identities characteristic of Western democracies, associated with identity-driven consumption in the context of the global capitalist market. All these transformations can be traced in local spheres such as carnival, memory, and identity. Sitges acts as a historical microcosm of gay identity in Spain, as the pre-gay, gay, and post-gay stages (Guasch, 2011, 2013) tie transformations in local gay identities in with global gay identities.

Sitges has hooked into globalism having created the conditions that have enabled the city to be defined as a gay tourist destination. In Sitges, gay identity is closely linked to the growth and development of carnival celebrations at a global level. Therefore, studying the origin, development, and evolution of Sitges' carnival is the central axis that allows us to observe the transformation of Sitges into an international gay tourist destination. The carnival also provides a backdrop to conflictive interactions between the different agents involved in opposing and contradictory projects to define the town: the elite classes and their interest in maintaining Sitges' air of exclusivity, the gay communities, and the tourism and leisure industry targeting that market segment.

Theoretical and methodological framework

There are various theoretical arguments that explain the genesis and development of "gay villages". For example, Collins (2004) suggests that in England there is a recurring pattern in the process of creating "English urban gay villages", characterised by the evolution of a declining urban area that progresses through several stages of economic development characterised by: a) sexual and legal liminality; b) social and recreational opportunities for the male gay community; c) a commercial base for the expanding services sector; and finally, d) the assimilation of the area into the mainstream of gay fashion and tourism. This would be the case in the development of Soho as a "gay village" in central London, or Chueca in Madrid, but it is not a theoretical framework applicable to the town of Sitges.

Studies on the development of the gay community in the Castro neighbourhood of San Francisco, California, offer other interesting theoretical perspectives for our case study. On the one hand, Murray (1996) stresses the importance of favourable social and political views toward gay people in a city as an element of attraction for the gay community. As a result, San Francisco is perceived as a city where being gay is not only accepted, but celebrated, and therefore it is home to a proportionally much larger gay population than in other cities. Black et al. (2002), on the other hand, believe that the luxury and comfort of a city are more important explanations than "acceptance and sympathy" to explain the choice made by the gay community to visit and live in an area. In their study, based on the econometric parameters of rational action, the authors argue that, due to the limitations of gay households in terms of having children, they are more likely to have more disposable income to spend on luxury and leisure goods than standard families do. Thus, gay communities tend to be located in towns or cities with greater possibilities for consumption, comfort, and leisure.

However, the study by Black et al. (2002) is unable to explain why San Francisco's location acted as a gay magnet compared to other US cities with

similar luxury and leisure offerings that did not have that same draw. This makes it possible to argue the need for “historical accidental causalities” to occur as a catalyst in the emergence of “gay villages.” A good example is the work of D’Emilio (1989), who argues that one of reasons the gay community emerged in San Francisco is that the U.S. Navy discharged a large number of gay sailors in the San Francisco area who then decided to continue living there.

The case of Sitges is very different from that of the Castro neighbourhood of San Francisco, but it resembles the development of Sydney as the gay capital of the South Pacific (Markwell, 2002), since in both cases, gay identity is intimately associated with the global growth and development of carnival festivities. It is possible to argue that the development of Sitges as one of the most important “gay villages” in the Mediterranean is due to the fact that it is one of the most exclusive and luxurious towns in Spain, as well as an open, bohemian locality that has shown tolerance towards the gay community since the mid-20th Century. But this historical development cannot be explained without tying it in with the global importance, visibility, and growth of carnival festivities.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the local elites of Sitges have tried to turn the city "into one of the most glamorous Mediterranean beaches and with all the modern equipment of the moment, attractive for elitist tourism"

Sitges has been a resort for over a hundred years. In 1918, the Town Council already had a tourist board, and there has been a tourist office there since 1934. At the end of the 19th Century, Sitges became an elegant and renowned area for recreation (Priestley 1984: 53). From the early 20th Century onwards, the local elite in Sitges sought to turn the town into one of the most glamorous beaches in the Mediterranean with all modern amenities and services of the time, which would draw upper class tourists (Francás, 2019: 2). There is also high-end residential holiday tourism in Sitges, associated with Barcelona residents who own second homes there. At the end of the 19th Century, Sitges became an important holiday destination for Barcelona’s upper classes. Gentrified families would send their gay sons away to their country residence in Sitges, where they could lead a life far away from the rumours circulating the upper echelons of Barcelona (Puigbo, Tardio and Ortega 2016: 61). And in the 1920s and 30s, Sitges welcomed intellectuals and artists of the Modernist movement (including the artist Santiago Rusiñol). Barcelona's upper classes and modernist intellectuals forged within Sitges an elitist, bohemian, and tolerant social landscape. And, from the 1950s onwards, gay figures linked to the world of art began moving to Sitges, creating a more permissive and tolerant space, always within the sphere of the most rigorous privacy (Sella 2000: 267). These intellectual, bohemian, and discreet ways of managing gay identities *behind closed doors* are typical of Francoism and afforded gay men a certain visibility within the ritual of carnival. This celebration evolved after the dictator’s death to become increasingly important and visible, even turning Sitges into a world-renowned “gay village”.

The contribution that carnival has made to Sitges being considered a must-see “global gay village” for international gay tourists must be studied based on its historical evolution, divided into three distinct models: pre-gay, gay, and post-gay (Guasch, 2011, 2013). This structure in three types of historical ideals allows us to observe in Spain the transformations of local gay identities through their connections with global gay identity. This transformation is accomplished through the pride and politicisation of sexual practices in ‘coming out’ stories. In the case of Spain, these biographical reconstruction gay identities develop throughout the latter part of the 20th Century and the early 21st Century.

During Franco’s dictatorship and in the years immediately following his death, a pre-gay identity model is central in Spain, characterised by discretion and concealment (to escape a prison sentence and police repression) and shame (derived from labelling gay men as deviants and associated stigmas). The subsequent gay model begins with the transition to democracy and extends until the late 1990s. Finally, there is the post-gay model that develops in the first decade of the 21st century, now in a context in which there are legal frameworks that recognise rights, and new forms of leisure, recreation, and socialisation derived from the use of information and communication technologies. These three models function as ideal types to situate the rapid transformations of local gay identities in recent decades, and also to connect processes to the international and global gay context.

The association of homosexuality with the world of art and culture, and the narrative of higher spending power among gay men, are discursive practices that contrast and combat the definitions of homosexuals as perverse, sordid, and abject beings. There is a set of social and historical processes that allow the homosexual perversion that characterised the pre-gay model to be transformed into the proud identity that characterises the gay model, culminating in the recognition of political rights, which are central to the post-gay model. These processes of change tend to be narrated from an evolutionary historical perspective. It is a point of view associated with an idea of progress that is measured in the form of securing rights. However, these accounts pay little attention to micro-history and to the contradictions and conflicts caused by the overlapping and coexistence between local and global forms of identity. To understand the establishment of Sitges as a gay village, we must pay attention to these hugely relevant transformations. The ritual and festive celebrations of the carnival provide the setting where these processes can be observed over time.

The field work for this study was carried out in 2020, interviewing 17 gay men who are residents of or have a holiday home in Sitges. Seven of them are contacts from previous fieldwork conducted in the locality, which allows us to discuss with them the evolution of gay communities in Sitges. Volunteers for the interviews were randomly identified throughout the data collection process; in some cases, the “corresponding author” and the second author of the article have remained personally close to the interviewees. The researchers also engaged with various social activities organised by the city’s leading gay association (*Gay Sitges Link*), and informal interviews were held with five of its members and with its president. The consolidation of these networks over time, together with ongoing

participation in many gay social and community activities in Sitges, gives greater currency and validity to the initial data collection process. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (code 21/7-2). All participants were informed that participation was voluntary. The anonymity and confidentiality of data was ensured at all times.

Identity and carnival during the pre-gay period.

At the beginning of the eighties, the Francoist ways of understanding homosexuality coexisted in Spain with the emerging gay models, which became generalized with the democratization process of the country, as described by Alberto Mira (2004), Fernando Villaamil (2004) and by Oscar Guasch (1991). In addition to Sitges, there have been other cases in Spain (such as Ibiza or Andalusia) where the intersections between local and global homosexualities are evident. The case of the Andalusian "mariquita" described by Rafael Cáceres and José María Valcuende (2014) is an example in this regard that also has other types of similarities with the case of Sitges. If in Sitges it is the athenaeums that support forms of homosexual visibility in carnival, in the Andalusian case it is the brotherhoods that offer some niches of visibility to the "mariquitas" in tasks such as dressing virgins and saints. But during the dictatorship, both in the Andalusian case and in the case of Sitges, sexuality between men was subjected to social stigmatization processes. For this reason, during Franco's dictatorship, gay men engaged with their sexuality in a semi-clandestine way, seeking to avoid gossip and legal and police repression. There were gay social networks made up of friends and lovers, as well as a few bars and venues that were tolerated by the authorities, but always under the threat of police raids and arrests. At that time, different social constructions of homosexuality coexisted. There was the medical construction that defined homosexuals as perverted. There was the definition derived from law, which classed homosexuals as sordid, criminal beings. And there was also the idea of homosexual artists, which in Spain has been linked to the world of copla music and folk song. In this context of discretion and concealment, we must ask ourselves about the conditions that allowed the first collective act of public visibility of gay communities in Spain to occur in Sitges. The fact that gay members of Barcelona's upper classes played a leading role in the Sitges carnival is an important element in this respect.

For more than a hundred years, there have been two rival clubs in Sitges ritually competing for matters of honour and social recognition. They are the *Casino Prado Suburense* (created in 1877) and the *Sociedad Recreativa El Retiro*, founded in 1870 (Roig, 2006). Both clubs organise social and cultural activities for their members. Organising and celebrating the carnival is one example. But Franco's dictatorship prohibited public carnival, and so these organisations had to celebrate in private venues. It is in these private places, where carnival was celebrated behind closed doors, that gay members of these clubs (and also their guests) were able to join in the private celebrations and costume parties that these associations would put on for their members. Indeed, many gay members of these clubs would attend parties and dances in drag. Although this occurred during Franco's regime, these cross-dressing or drag practices were tolerated within the

private confines of these clubs and associations. But these cross-dressers begin to take to the streets and to show themselves in public after the dictator's death.

In the final years of the dictatorship, Sitges was home to intellectuals and artists, upper classes from Barcelona, and gay locals and tourists. They were diverse social groups, forging connections based on shared experiences derived from repression endured during Franco's regime. The particular causes of repression were varied: lack of political rights and freedom of expression, persecution of the Catalan language, laws of repression against homosexuality, etc. But the atmosphere of repression created informal bonds of solidarity that allowed for tolerance and a certain licence behind closed doors of ways of being and thinking that were persecuted in public: this included political expressions, the use of the Catalan language, and also homosexuality. Therefore, for all these social groups in Sitges, carnival celebrations during the dictatorship acquired a sense of resistance and transgression, which the gay communities in Sitges seized in order to gain a certain degree of visibility.

Although carnivals were celebrated in private, "this festivity takes on an element of subversion with respect to the moral conduct imposed by the dictatorship" (Lacaba, 2004: 117). In such a context, many upper-class gay men living in Sitges (and also their guests) took advantage of the celebrations to dress up in drag during the liminal period of carnival (Turner, 1988). It was a discrete homosexual activity that was permitted by the dictatorship. For their part, the elite classes from Sitges and Barcelona brandished tolerance as a sign of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) against the Spanish authoritarian regime. They were homonationalist practices *avant la lettre*. But the truth is that carnival during the dictatorship was an instrument that enabled informal social networks of gay interaction to enjoy increased visibility. In the 1960s and early 70s, Sitges had an informal system of gay sociability that interacted with broader social networks led and organised by gay men: theatre groups, sporting and cultural associations, members clubs, etc. However, erotic sociability between these men was limited to private spaces, to a few pubs and bars, and, above all, to peripheral locations on the outskirts of the town (forests, cliff tops and beaches) where they would go cruising (Guasch, 1991; Langarita, 2014, 2015).

The first information addressing the general public about the presence of gay people in Sitges occurred during the dictatorship. During the carnival of 1973, the press of the time explained the arrests made by the Civil Guard in the club *Los Tarantos*. A total of 10 men dressed in women's clothing were arrested for public *scandal* (Sella, 2000: 268). In those years, the crime of *public scandal* enabled officers to arrest gay men and prostitutes. But there was also specific anti-homosexual legislation. The so-called *Law on Social Danger*, which came into force in 1970 (Huard, 2014). These arrests show that not even during carnival could homosexuals at the time escape police repression altogether. As Geoffroy Huard explains in the case of Barcelona, there was a certain tolerance of homosexuality among the upper classes (Huard, 2021) who had social connections. But there was legislation against gay men that applied to poorer individuals and especially to those who had moved from the country to the city (Arnalte, 2003; Olmeda, 2004).

At that time, in addition to upper-class homosexuals, tourists from other countries can also escape police repression. This is possible because the relations of the Franco regime with tourism are contradictory. On the one hand, in the 1960s and 1970s, the country needed foreign currency income to favour its economy. But, on the other hand, the Franco regime fears the contamination that tourism can cause in the moral health of the local population (Cáceres, Valcuende, Parrilla & Pérez 2021). Despite everything, the regime practices a certain tolerance towards the customs of foreigners, and even the police are ordered to be flexible in this regard (Pack, 2009: 132). However, all those detained at the Los Tarantos nightclub were natives and working class. Perhaps for this reason the press at the time was cruel to them: According to Roset, Esquerda & Escofet (2023) the humiliation experienced and suffered by the ten detainees was significant. Under each published photograph, the name and surname, the origin and the trade (waiter, cook, mechanic, hairdresser, dressmaker, administrative, student, etc.) were given. During the Franco regime, these arrests show native homosexuals which social order they must respect.

The dictator General Francisco Franco died in 1975. Spain then embarked on a risky, complex, and contradictory political process to restore democracy. This process questioned the existing forms of conservative and Catholic morality. It was the origin of the *democratic regime of '78* (Monedero, 2011): a context of rapid political transformations in which existing anti-homosexual laws ceased to apply. Little research has been carried out on the political mechanisms that allowed Spanish gay communities to present themselves as legitimate citizens in society. But building a respectable and acceptable image of homosexuality is an element that favours tolerance. One way to achieve these goals is to present male homosexuality as a sign of distinction in males (Diaz, 2021). This is a sign of distinction and sophistication that extends to the social environment of gay men. It is a kind of reverse stigma in which to surround yourself with gay friends and acquaintances acts as a preserve of good taste and modernity.

The end of the dictatorship allowed gay people in Sitges to occupy the physical and symbolic space of carnival. That is why carnival was also the context for the first attempts to limit gay visibility in the town. In Sitges, the five-year period between 1975 and 1980 was a liminal time in which anything was possible, and everything was yet to be created. There was a collective rejection of the conservative morality imposed by Catholic nationalism. In this context, carnival parties organised by local cultural associations (*Prado*, *Retiro*, and others) moved out onto the streets in spontaneous and chaotic celebrations. There was at that time no formal carnival organisation. It was a collective, cathartic process of celebrating their newly regained freedom in which the gay population played a central role in Sitges. Between 1975 and 1980, the idea of the Sitges carnival as a gay tourist destination was forged in the international imagination (Lacaba, 2004). Dressed in elegant Marie-Antoinette-style crinolines, and followed by dozens of admirers, drag queens would roam the streets talking to members of the public who would applaud their witticisms. Year after year, these drag artists would engage in witty repartee in the streets to choose the queen of the carnival. In that liminal period (1975-1980), the people of Sitges exhibited a kind of complicit

tolerance. There was no violence, and members of the public took part enthusiastically. Permissiveness, festivity, and celebration were the hallmarks of a carnival that is still legendary in the memory of gay people locally and internationally.

Liminal periods have an orgiastic feel to them (Mafessoli, 1996) that allows for the temporary suspension of social norms. During this five-year period of liminality in Sitges (1975-1980), homophobia as a strategy for social control was weakened. The whole of society celebrated freedom, and this extended to gay people, especially at carnival. But liminality is transitory, and afterwards structure and social order are restored. In this case, social order through homophobia was regained in 1983. That year, the Town Council rejected the request of a local gay resident to set up a tent to celebrate carnival (Sella, 2000; Lacaba, 2004; Canet, 2007). The arguments used in the council's debates show no empathy towards gay people. Socialist local council member Fermín Oliver argued that the gay carnival frightened people and was bad for culture, and that if a gay carnival is allowed, one day prostitutes might even seek to organise a carnival in Sitges (Sella, 2000: 274). Here the liminal period ends, and social order is re-established in terms of homophobia. From that moment on, transvestites and drag queens are no longer seen everywhere, sticking instead to streets where gay clubs and bars are located.

That liminal five-year period (1975-1980) was a unique moment of public celebration of sexual freedom that remains legendary in the local and international gay imagination. In 1981, a military coup was staged, highlighting the fragility of democracy and freedom. Since that year, the Sitges carnival, which is organised by various local associations, has taken the form of a parade. And this parade does not sit comfortably with the spontaneous presence of drag queens and their small-scale performances, as queens pit their wits against one another, gathering small crowds around them. From informal drag spontaneity, the town has move towards formal and orderly procession. This has been a way of reining in carnival, defining the acceptable forms of citizen presence in public spaces. And those who do not accept the new rules are no longer legitimate onlookers. This implies the expulsion of gay people from the Sitges carnival. To counter this, gay bars and venues put decking out the front on the street, where drag queens can parade and perform. But the separation between the local heterosexual population and gay people in the ritual framework of the carnival became insurmountable. The gay population were excluded from the formal organisation and participation in the carnival. This marked the first exclusion of gay people in the city. The second exclusion included police repression and public violence.

The transition to gay identity.

Despite everything that happened in Sitges, historical processes continued their course, and the establishment of democracy in Spain acted as a catalyst to extend the model of gay identity based on visibility and pride. In this political context, a wide range of leisure and recreation activities aimed at the gay public began to grow in Sitges. Seasonal tourist infrastructure was

created, welcoming local and foreign gay visitors during the high season, and Sitges' reputation as a gay-friendly town won out. In addition, the locality became a world-renowned holiday destination for that market segment. In part, as a result of the idealisation of its carnival, Sitges became a mythical and special place in the international gay imaginary. The orientalist perspective with which many gay visitors contemplate the town also helped in this regard. And throughout the year, and especially during the high season, the presence of gay people was evident. This clear and massive gay visibility on the streets challenged the project that local elites had devised for Sitges: to develop the town as a high-end residential locality. Once again, carnival was the space in which opposing projects for the locality were expressed in a conflictive way.

French essayist Guy Hocquenghem (1980) expressed his disappointment he could not find any gay men in the city of Barcelona when he visited that year. Five years after Franco's death, gay identity in Spain was still under construction. At this time, a new space emerged in Sitges where new forms of representation for gay identity became visible: *Trailer*, a nightclub that opened in 1980. *Trailer* was Spain's first ever gay nightclub, and a pioneer in showing codes and behaviours of gay identity. In *Trailer*, markers of gay masculinity such as body hair, muscles, and a defiant attitude became visible (Ferrándiz, 2019). *Trailer* became the socialisation hub for the new gay model. The new iconography included bikers, lumberjacks, police, military, and construction workers. As one *Trailer* regular in the 1980s explains: "*Trailer* was really intense, because they put *poppers* in the ventilation system and people were having sex in public in the toilets.² But it had a really good vibe. We danced with no shirt on and kissed while we were dancing." The same interviewee compares the gay clubs and bars of Sitges with those of Madrid of the same time: "In 1981, I was in Madrid with the army. And the people who went to gay bars and clubs there would get all dressed up looking smart, wearing blazers. I was wearing jeans with my backside half hanging out, and when I met an American soldier from the Torrejon military base in a gay bar, we were kicked out for causing a scandal because we almost had sex right in front of everyone. But of course, I was used to *Trailer*, and Madrid was a bit boring and conservative" (*Pep*, 64 years old, bank clerk).

Until the 1992 Olympics, the two identity models coexisted in Sitges: the pre-gay model and the gay model. It was a mixture of generations: there were the older local gay residents alongside new generations of gay men, but there were also tourists from other countries who found in Sitges similar scenes to those on the international gay scene. All of this concentrated in a small coastal town in the Spanish Mediterranean. The legend of Sitges as an international gay destination stems from its carnival and also includes this mixture of identities and local and global representations of gay identities. And these processes were most evident at the *Trailer* nightclub. Some

² The term "poppers" is a slang word that describes certain inhalants composed of amyl, butyl, or isobutyl nitrites. They are colorless and odorless liquids that are sold in small glass canisters for inhalation. They are volatile substances that when inhaled produce a stimulating and vasodilator effect with a feeling of euphoria and increased sexual desire; although these effects wear off quickly and give way to a feeling of exhaustion.

informants explain how they would spend part of the night walking around the town during the carnival festivities, then going to *Trailer* to dance the night away, wearing the gay uniform: trainers, T-shirt, and jeans. Until the end of the 20th Century, *Trailer* was the epicentre of gay nightlife in Sitges, and the opening (in April) and closure (in October) of this club marked the start and end of the gay tourist season in the town.

The embodiment of the gay model in Sitges in the 1990s offered gay residents and visitors: bars to have a drink and meet one another, clubs to dance, urban beaches to socialise and sunbathe, and beaches on the outskirts surrounded by forests and cliffs where they could engage in cruising. In the 1990s, Catalonia did not have any neighbourhoods like Chueca (Madrid) or Castro (San Francisco). And Sitges was the closest thing to a gay neighbourhood. It was a small seaside resort, with an urban centre that was home to gay bars, saunas, and other venues. During those years, in Sitges, it was easy and safe to walk the streets. Sitges was a town made for walking. Many informants insist that part of the charm of the town is the possibility of wandering through different streets and urban beaches in the presence of an enveloping, constant, and welcoming gay atmosphere: “The circuit was almost always the same [...] but it was non-stop [...] we got up late and went to the beach until almost sunset. Then we drank a beer in the Montroig or in Los Vikingos, to see handsome boys walking around [...] before taking a late nap to rest a bit [...] we could have dinner in the apartment and have the first drink on a terrace [...] to go to El Candil at midnight. Later, around 11:30 p.m. or midnight, we would go to the Mediterranean, which had a good disc jockey and played house music. And at about 3 in the morning we were already in the Trailer queue to get in [...] when Trailer closed, or you took off with a lover to his hotel; Or at about five thirty in the morning you could look for sex on the beach, next to the promenade. And, the next day, start again” (Luis David, 61 years old professor).

By the 1990s, the gay model was already fully established in the locality, and rituals of gay interaction in the town were organised cyclically according to the holiday calendar. There was also an adaptation of activities to certain times and spaces. There were two central streets in the gay interaction of that time: *Primer de Maig* and *Sant Bonaventura*. In carnival, summer, and also on weekends, gay men would walk along these two streets, looking and being seen. In the 1990s, the urban mobility of gay men walking around the town in a relaxed way seems to be one of the characteristics that was most appreciated by visitors to the town. Throughout the season, the visibility of men who use dress codes as markers of gay identity was huge.

Despite the fact that, after their expulsion from the carnival in the 1980s, gay nightlife became concentrated in specific venues, pubs, and clubs, there was also an important gay daytime presence on urban beaches, terraces, restaurants, and cafés. This visibility reached such proportions that it began to upset the local population. Up until 1996, in Sitges, there was a tacit agreement of coexistence (or mutual ignorance) between the gay communities and the local population. Public spaces were shared with little

interaction. This implicit pact was broken in 1996, setting in motion the second exclusion of gay communities. That year, there was institutional and police violence, fascist violence, and also popular violence against gay people. These were events to remember.

In 1996, the municipal government formed by conservative parties launched police identification checks at night on the main urban beach used for cruising. The argument put forward was that this measure was designed to combat prostitution. For weeks, cruising areas were monitored, and some gay men were detained and released the next day. This institutional and police violence preceded the ensuing aggressions. There were frequent assaults, but few were reported. The most serious assault was the brutal beating of a waiter from a gay club (*Parrots*, in September 1996) at the end of the summer season. The tolerance of the local population towards the gay communities had shattered. Sitges has a primeval (almost sacred) character for gay people. That is why the debate over the response to these attacks generated great tension in the gay political movement.

The violence in Sitges and the subsequent debate on how to respond illustrate the changes in leadership and discourse of the gay movement in Spain. In 1996, there was a shift away from gay organisations and leaders with more revolutionary leanings towards more pragmatic reformist movements willing to collaborate with institutions. But in Spain, revolutionary gay associations (the *Gay Liberation Front*) have been around for longer than in other Western countries (Calvo, 2017). The bitter debate between revolutionaries and reformists on how to respond to the violence in Sitges marked a turning point in the internal hegemony of the gay movement. The reformist *Coordinadora Gay Lesbiana* proposed a demonstration in Barcelona (outside the regional government headquarters). While the revolutionary *Front Alliberament Gai* called for a demonstration in Sitges (against the judgement of well-informed gay residents of the locality).

What happened on 5 October 1996 at the demonstration in Sitges convened by the *Front d'Alliberament Gai* poisoned relations between the local population and gay communities. In the words of some of those who attended this demonstration: "We went by train together to the rally in Sitges and when we got off the train we were surprised at the sheer numbers of police and Civil Guard there to protect us. The demonstration began, and we were surrounded by people from the town: fathers, mothers and children who kept insulting us and spitting at us all the way and started throwing eggs at us as we marched in front of the police with the people of the town raging against us" (Guillot and Franch, 2008: 65-66). Sitges is a small community, and, at that time, the demonstration called by the *Front d'Alliberament Gai* was perceived as an invasion. That moment of October 1996 was an outpouring of homophobia that had been contained up until then against the visibility of gay communities in the locality (Canet, 2007).

Several informants describe the progressive degeneration of the carnival in Sitges from 1996 onwards. The carnival was no longer a local event, homespun and integrating. It became a massive act that spills out beyond the boundaries of the locality. The seductive games of banter between drag queens and members of the public out in the streets became risky and dangerous. And the event became a hotspot for binge drinking.

One regular carnival participant explains: “Until the Olympic Games, the carnival was worth it because people knew how to behave themselves and go along with the drag queens, but then things became broken and you have to put police in the train station to take liquor bottles from drunk people” (Ángel, 59 years old, cook). Most interviewees argued that the carnival lost its charm following the attacks of 1996. Year after year, the local press also denounces the degeneration of the carnival, although without recognising the original role played by gay communities in its heyday.

In the chronicle entitled “The Carnival of Sitges celebrates 40 years in all its glory”, Sergi Quitián (2015) explains the evolution and development of the carnival. He highlights issues of safety and public order and the fight against alcohol abuse, prohibiting drinking on the street. Five years later, the digital publisher of the local weekly explains that “in the 1990s, we led the way, not only in the local area, but in the whole of Catalonia and Spain, earning us international recognition, which some people still claim today. But the reality is different. We are neither the best nor the most original”.³ Without the leadership of the gay communities, the town’s carnival loses its originality. It ceases to be an imaginative homespun carnival and tries to imitate, without great success, Rio’s exuberant style of carnival.

Sitges: from diaspora to redemption. The post-gay period.

As an advanced democracy, Spain reproduces most of the elements that define the post-gay model: recognition of equality before the law and the enactment of laws against discrimination and against homophobia. In Sitges, the transformations that the post-gay model has produced in terms of leisure and in the socialisation of gay men are visible. Gradually, institutions of the gay model such as saunas, bars and clubs have closed down (*Trailer* closed its doors in 2015) and gay sociability has shifted into the virtual world through mobile phone apps. Despite this, Sitges maintains its offer of gay events tourism (*Pride*, *Bear Sitges Week*, *Circuit Festival*).

The post-gay model in Spain began with the same-sex marriage law of 2005, while the end of the gay diaspora in Sitges came about in 2006. That year, the first sculpture dedicated to gay people in a Spanish town was unveiled. The sculpture is in the shape of an inverted triangle and was inaugurated on 5th October 2006, ten years after the violent events of 1996. The monument is an institutional act that seeks to redeem the town’s violent homophobic past. However, even after 2006, municipal institutions continue to show little interest in incorporating gay memory as a central part of the town’s common memory. The way local agencies handle the representation of the gay world in institutional tourist advertising illustrates these ambivalences and contradictions with regard to gay communities.

Noelia Ballesteros (2017) includes Sitges in her list of established gay tourist destinations in Spain (along with Madrid, Barcelona, Ibiza, the Canary Islands, and Torremolinos). And Gloria Úbeda (2014) describes the strong seasonality of tourist demand in the city, since the highest demand is

³In Catalan, in the original: <http://lecodesitges.cat/el-carnaval-de-sitges-una-festa-en-constant-modificacio/>

concentrated between May and October. During the other months, occupancy levels are lower. The season starts at Carnival and Easter. The high season starts in May. And the season ends in October. That is why municipal tourism management agencies promote convention tourism. The main website of the Sitges Town Hall dedicated to tourism (<https://www.visitsitges.com/es/>) talks about the Sitges brand, culture and beaches, and congress tourism. But it does not include any reference to gay tourism. Only within the leisure section of this website is there a section on gay-friendly Sitges. Tourism managers understand Sitges as a gay-friendly tourist destination, but not as a gay destination.

Ignacio Elpidio Domínguez (2017) summarises two ways to understand the concept of gay tourism: one aimed at LGBTI people; and the general destinations that are presented as friendly to LGBTI people. Institutional advertising presents Sitges as a gay-friendly destination but not as a gay destination. The last paragraph of the home page of www.visitsitges.com states the following: "Sitges has always been characterised by its tolerance and the open mentality of its inhabitants and visitors. It is a place of coexistence, where diversity adds and enriches, and everyone is welcome regardless of race, religion, or sexual orientation". Sitges offers itself up as a welcoming and hospitable space for all kinds of people, visitors, and customers. It does not present itself as a special place for gay people; but it does claim that they will be well taken care of. The treatment of gay tourism by institutional advertising is non-specific. As Gloria Úbeda explains (2014: 48), the institutional promotion of gay tourism in Sitges is a purposefully hidden niche. The importance of the locality as an international reference and as a legendary space for gay communities is ignored by institutional tourist advertising.

Since 2006, the inclusion of Sitges on gay tourist circuits reproduces the international liturgies: Pride, drag galas, or the circuit. Sitges held its first *Pride* festival in 2009. The first Drag Queen gala held as part of the Sitges carnival was in 2020. And the August *Circuit Festival* that has been taking place in Barcelona since 2008 includes activities in Sitges. *Bear Sitges Week* has been taking place twice a year since 2001. Like neighbouring Barcelona and other tourist destinations, Sitges suffers from seasonality, overcrowding and tourismphobia (Fuster and Gregori, 2017). But in Sitges, tourismphobia is mixed with the usual homophobia. On 19 July 2020, the local Sitges press published an opinion piece criticising semi-naked men kissing outside bars. Its author Josep Maria Matas (2019) says he fears being raped by such men. The article, which was denounced by the Gay Sitges Link association, is yet another example of local ambivalence regarding gay tourism and resident gay communities.

Analysis

Tourism, migration, and communication technologies show processes of homogenisation and cultural heterogenization (Garcia-Canclini, 2000; Appadurai, 2001; Ortiz, 2004) that also condition gay identities. Part of the gay reality is visible in the leisure industry associated with international tourist destinations for that market segment. Sitges is an example of this. These

processes are part of the “globalisation of homosexualities” (Plummer, 1992). Terms such as homosexual, gay, or lesbian are used throughout the world (Lancaster, 1988; Tan, 1995). Western ways of thinking about homosexuality have become globalised (Altman, 1996; Parker, 1999; Jackson, 2001; Cáceres and Valcuende, 2014). And, although globalisation is characterised by the denationalisation of capital, culture, lifestyles, and beliefs, it does not necessarily eliminate the notion of the local (Markwell, 2002). This clash between the local and the global and the types of tensions that are generated can be seen perfectly through the historical analysis of the Sitges carnival, which goes from being an almost private event during the dictatorship and which during that time had a sense of resistance and transgression, to become a world-renowned tourist event with the inclusion of the Sitges carnival on international gay tourist circuits.

The fact that Sitges is one of the most exclusive and luxurious towns in Spain, as well as being historically more open, bohemian, and tolerant than other nearby towns and cities, does not in itself explain how it has come to be known as a world-class “gay village”. This historical development cannot be explained without tying it in with the global importance, visibility, and growth of carnival festivities. The first collective act of gay visibility in Spain took place in Sitges during the carnival, when gay men occupied the public space and took control of the symbolic order that defines it. They took over the narrative. Between 1975 and 1980, there were social conditions that enabled the gay appropriation of carnival festivities. The Franco regime had died, and democratic order was about to be born. It was a disorganised and spontaneous appropriation that was ostensibly tolerated by the local population. This tolerance ended in 1983 when local institutions put limits on gay participation in the carnival. It was a way of constraining what was perceived as excessive visibility. From that moment on, gay men were treated as *outsiders*, excluded from formal carnival organisation and participation. The spontaneous and anarchic presence of drag queens in the festivities remained, but the rules of formal organisation expelled gay communities from the carnival.

However, the gay model in Sitges continued to take firm root up to the end of the 1980s, shoring up uninhibited forms of gay presence in the locality. It was a gay presence characteristic of members of the aspirational middle classes, a far cry from the old elitist model that was tolerated by the local population in the past. New forms of gay visibility in public settings led to a decline in relations with the local population, and Sitges became an increasingly hostile space. Aggression by the police, institutions, and the general public against gay people and collectives in 1996 sent out a clear message: “we don’t want you here.” In 1983, there was clear discrimination in excluding gay people from formal participation in the carnival. But during the events of 1996, violence was used to bring about the expulsion of gay men, as if they were not members of the community. This violence gave rise to the diaspora of some of Sitges’ gay community towards post-Olympics Barcelona.

Ten years later, in 2006, now in the post-gay model, Sitges' Town Hall erected a monument against homophobia that defined the type of relations that local institutions want to have with gay communities. In particular,

welcoming gay tourists and reproducing global gay rituals in the locality, including the *Circuit*, *Bear* celebrations and *Pride*. Gay tourism has become a great source of income and Sitges in no way rejects that, but for local institutions, Sitges is a town like any other. From this point of view, Sitges is a town that accepts and hosts institutional gay celebrations and rituals. But for local institutions, it is not a particularly gay town. The official and institutional memory of the town still does not include the gay account of the town's history and past.

The presence of gay men in the town, their style of leisure, and their blatant visibility in the carnival, generate ambivalence. The gay community in Sitges is a source of wealth: there are wealthy gay pensioners who live in the town, and Sitges attracts many gay tourists and visitors. The gay community puts Sitges on the world map. But Sitges treats these communities as outsiders. Without the first gay carnival and without gay tourism, Sitges would be less known. However, Sitges is a legend for gay tourism. The local tourism sector would lose income and jobs without its gay component. Despite this, gay tourism is treated as irrelevant by local institutions.

Conclusions

Sitges shares with neighbouring towns its microclimate, proximity to Barcelona and also air, rail, and motorway connections. In this sense, Sitges offers no particular advantage over other nearby beach destinations. What makes Sitges special is its history as a resort for Barcelona's upper classes, which creates an artistic and bohemian environment, tolerant of the resident gay colonies and also of gay tourism. This tolerance has been shattered on two occasions. Firstly, in 1983, when gay communities were excluded from the carnival. And secondly, in 1996, when gay men were attacked, insulted, and ritually expelled from the neighbourhood community. Sitges' relations with gay communities are full of contradictions and ambivalence because, despite the wealth they generate, they are labelled outsiders. At the moment, Sitges is a high-end residential neighbourhood of Barcelona that maintains its reputation as a place of residence and tourism for affluent gay residents and visitors. It also maintains the leisure infrastructure with thriving gay pubs, clubs, bars, hotels, and shops (especially in the summer season). Sitges is still present as a legendary destination in the global gay imaginary. But the local authorities do not capitalise on this reputation.

The 19th Century project of the local elites who wanted to turn the locality into a luxury destination for international tourism has succeeded and, at the same time, is challenged by the visibility and the massive presence of gay residents and visitors. In the pre-gay model, that visibility is confined to private, upper-class spaces, where some *insiders* are given a certain licence regarding their sexuality that is applauded by their elitist social milieu. In a bohemian, intellectual and artistic context, this licence is perceived as a sign of distinction and even a hallmark of class. But the massive, brazen, interclass occupation of public spaces that is characteristic of the gay model (especially in carnival) questions the town's status as a high-class luxury residential town. Thus, various mechanisms of violence and social control have been activated to expel gay communities from the locality. The success

of these is relative because, in the 21st Century, Sitges is still an inescapable destination on international gay tourist circuits, and gay communities are still present in Sitges and are very visible in the locality. This time, in the form of affluent gay men, many of whom are retired and have chosen to spend their retirement in this town. The success of the project to turn the town of Sitges into a luxury town also owes much to its gay residents and visitors. But the institutional memory of the town still ignores the gay narrative about the city's past. In that sense, exclusion persists.

References

- Altman D (1996) Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalization of Gay Identities. *Social Text* 48: 77-94.
- Appadurai A (2001) *La modernidad desbordada*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Trilce.
- Arnalte A (2003) *Redada de violetas. La represión de los homosexuales bajo el franquismo*. Madrid: La esfera de los libros.
- Ballesteros N (2017) *LGTB como destino turístico*. Final degree Dissertation, Universidad de Sevilla, Spain.
- Black D, Gates G, Sanders S, et al. (2002) Why do gay men live in San Francisco? *Journal of Urban Economics* 51(1): 54–76.
- Bourdieu P (1979) *La distinción. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Cáceres R and Valcuende JM (2014) Globalización y diversidad sexual, gays y marisetas en Andalucía. *Gazeta de Antropología* 30, 3: Art. 7.
- Cáceres R, Valcuende JM, Parilla JC and Pérez JM (2021) *El pasaje Begoña en la memoria lgtbi+. Libertad y represión de la sexualidad en Torremolinos durante el franquismo (1962-1971)*. Sevilla, Consejería de Igualdad, Políticas Sociales y Conciliación.
- Calvo K (2017) *¿Revolución o reforma? La transformación de la identidad política del movimiento LGTB en España, 1970-2005*. Madrid: Politeya/CSIC.
- Canet V (2007) Sitges. El nacimiento de un destino turístico gay (1980-2008). *Destinos. Revista Zero*, 1 Dec, 5.
- Collins A (2004). Sexual dissidence, enterprise and assimilation: Bedfellows in urban regeneration. *Urban Studies* 41(9): 1789-1806.
- Cubillos J (2006) *Sitges: el Carnaval*. Tarragona: Arola.
- D'Emilio J (1989) Gay politics and community in San Francisco since World War II. In: M. B. Duberman (Ed.) *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*. New York: NAL Books, pp. 456–473.
- Díaz (2021) Afeminados de vida ociosa: sexualidad, género y clase social durante el franquismo. *Historia Contemporánea* 65: 131-162.
- Domínguez I (2017) *Arcoiris mundiales y locales: la promoción de la*

diversidad de Madrid en torno al World Pride 2017. PhD Thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain.

Ferrándiz I (2019) *Hombres de carne y pelo. Los "osos" de Barcelona desde una mirada etnográfica*. PhD Thesis, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain.

Francás R (2019) Que no pare la música. *La Vanguardia*, 7 Dec, 9.

Fuster M and Gregori C (2017) La construcción discursiva del turismo en la prensa española (verano de 2017). *Discurso y Sociedad* 3(2): 195-224.

García-Canclini N (2000) La globalización: ¿productora de culturas híbridas? In: *Actas del III Congreso Latinoamericano de la Asociación Internacional para el Estudio de la Música Popular*. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B3CBLYX406q2U1IMbVFIYTN6MUK/view?sourcekey=0-ZSjed0OHa254XAcx-1NRLw> (Accessed 19 May 2022).

Guasch O (1991) *La sociedad rosa*. Barcelona: Anagrama.

Guasch O (2011) Social stereotypes and masculine homosexualities: the Spanish cases. *Sexualities* 14-15: 526-543.

Guasch O (2013) La construcción cultural de la homosexualidad masculina en España (1970-1995). In: Mérida-Jiménez R (Ed.) *Minorías sexuales en España (1970-1995)*. Barcelona: Icaria, pp.11-25.

Guillot C and Franch M (2008) Okupant la norma. In: Rodríguez E and Pujol J (Eds.) *Els drets a les llibertats. Una història política de l'alliberament GLT a Catalunya (FAGC 1986-2006)*. Barcelona: Editorial Virus, pp.61-72.

Hocquenghem G (1980) *Le gay voyage*. París: Albin Michel.

Huard G (2014) *Los antisociales. Historia de la homosexualidad en Barcelona y París (1945-1975)*. Madrid: Marcial Pons.

Huard G (2015) Los *invertidos* en Barcelona. Masculinidades cuestionadas durante el franquismo en los archivos judiciales. In: Mérida-Jiménez R and Peralta JL (Eds.) *Las masculinidades en la Transición*. Madrid: Egales, pp.207-222.

Huard G (2016) *Les gays sous le franquisme. Discours, subcultures et revendications a Barcelone 1939-1977*. Villeurbanne: Orbis Tertius.

Huard G (2021) *Los invertidos. Verdad, justicia y reparación para gais y transexuales durante bajo la dictadura franquista*. Barcelona: Icaria.

Jackson P (2001) Pre-Gay, Post-Queer. *Journal of Homosexuality* 40/3: 1-25.

Lacaba JJ (2004) Sitges (Catalunya) y el carnaval gay: el turismo y sus nuevos peregrinajes. *PASOS: Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural* 2: 111-124.

Lancaster R (1988) Subject Honor and Object Shame: The Construction of

- Male Homosexuality and Stigma in Nicaragua". *Ethnology*, vol. 27, 2: 111-125.
- Langarita JA (2015) *En tu árbol o en el mío. Una aproximación etnográfica a la práctica del sexo anónimo entre hombres*. Barcelona: Editorial Bellaterra.
- Langarita JA (2014) *Intercambio sexual anónimo en espacios públicos. La práctica del cruising en el parque de Montjuïc, Gavà y Sitges*. PhD Thesis, Universidad de Barcelona, Spain.
- Mafessoli M (1996) *De la orgia. Una aproximación sociológica*. Barcelona: Ariel.
- Markwell K (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), 81-99.
- Matas JM (2019) Quina por. *L'Eco de Sitges*, 19 Jul, 23.
- Mira, Alberto 2004 *De Sodoma a Chueca: historia cultural de la homosexualidad en España 1914-1990*. Barcelona-Madrid, Egales.
- Monedero JC (2011) *La transición contada a nuestros padres. Nocturno de la democracia española*. Madrid: Ediciones La Catarata.
- Murray S (1996) *American Gay*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Olmeda F (2004) *El látigo y la pluma. Homosexuales en la España de Franco*. Madrid: Oberon.
- Ortiz R (2004) *Mundialización y cultura*. Bogotá: Convenio Andrés Bello.
- Pack SD (2009) *La invasión pacífica: Los turistas y la España de Franco*. Barcelona. Turner.
- Parker R (1999) *Beneath the Equator: Cultures of Desire, Male Homosexuality and Emerging Gay Communities in Brazil*. New York: Routledge.
- Plummer K (1992). Speaking its Name: Inventing a Lesbian and Gay Studies. In Plummer K (Ed.), *Modern Homosexualities. Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience*. Nueva York, Routledge, pp.3-25.
- Priestley G (1984) Sitges, Playa de Oro: la evolución de su industria turística hasta 1976. *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* 5: 47-73.
- Puigbó J, Tardió P and Ortega, H (2016) Creando espacios para la participación popular en el patrimonio: el caso de la comunidad gay en Sitges. *Perifèria: revista de recerca i formació en antropologia* 21(2): 58-79.
- Quitíán, S (2015) El Carnaval de Sitges cumple 40 años de esplendor. *La Vanguardia*, 12 Feb, 10.
- Roig A (2006) *Sitges dels nostres avis*. Sitges: Estudis Sitgetans.
- Roset I, Esquerda M, and Escofet J (2023) 50 años de carnaval marica <https://colorssitgeslink.org/blog/50-anos-de-carnaval-marica>

Sella A (2000) Breu semblança d'un desamor. Sitges i el carnaval gai. In: Forns M, et al. *Cinc mirades al Carnaval de Sitges. Segles XV-XX*. Sitges: Societat Recreativa El Retiro, pp.267-280.

Tan M (1995) From Bakla to Gay. Shifting Gender Identities and Sexual Behaviors in the Philippines. In Parker R and Gagnon J (Ed.). *Conceiving Sexuality*. New York: Routledge, pp.85-96.

Turner V (1988) *El proceso ritual*. Madrid: Taurus.

Úbeda G (2014) *El turisme gai a Sitges*. Final degree Dissertation, Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Spain.

Villaamil, Fernando 2004 *La transformación de la identidad gay en España*. Madrid, La Catarata.