Power in Space and Culture: An Analysis of Chester Street Dance Club

By Parthiban Muniandy
Senior Undergraduate in Sociology
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
University of Illinois

Introduction¹

Chester Street Dance Club in Downtown Champaign, Illinois is a prominent ‘gay club’ in the Urbana-Champaign area, with a (in)famous reputation for catering to a diverse group of patrons, ranging from Goths to Drag Queens. The club is a popular spot for both hetero- and homosexual people, though it does not cater to any group exclusively. As a site for an ethnographic study, C. Street provides an interestingly uninhibited look at the cultural practices of a host of alternative lifestyles, including the two mentioned above. The primary research methodology for this study is based on Michael Burawoy’s rendition of the Extended Case Method (ECM). ECM, as outlined by Burawoy (1998:5), is the application of “reflexive science in ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the micro to the macro, and to connect the present to the past to anticipate the future, by building on pre-existing theory.” I will be using my own experiences doing ethnography at C. Street to build upon Foucaultian theoretical frameworks on power-knowledge, space, and cultural practices. Specifically, this paper will attempt to compare and contrast two major theories on the relationship between power and cultural practices of resistance and liberation, the first coming from Michael and Stills’ (1992) "Resource for Resistance" and the second from Lacombe’s (1996) "Critique of Social Control." Still and Michael (1992) argue that our environment provides us ‘affordances’ that are beyond the prescriptions of power-knowledge, thus providing

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resources for resistance to the mainstream. Lacombe (1996), on the other hand, argues that practices of resistance and liberation are embedded within the scope of power-knowledge, thus making those practices a necessary element for power and regulation of society. By considering these theories in light of my observations at C. Street, I found that the ‘affordance’ theory is only partially sufficient at explaining the cultural practices, while Lacombe’s theory is much better at comprehensively explaining them.

**Overview of the Study**

Initially, this study had started out as an observation of people at a gay bar, but it turned into a study of the processes of power embedded in cultural practices and spaces that we live in. The reason for this drastic change is the marked differences in demography and social practices observed at the site on the various nights that I was there. The fact that each night had its own theme is not sufficient to explain the predominance of Black people on Wednesday night, for instance. It certainly did not explain the variety of cultural ‘practices and performances’ that took place in this space over the course of my visits. These elements were segregated in many ways, limited and restricted to certain times, which raised questions about the processes that were involved that were creating these conditions. This, in turn, led to an inquiry about the power at work regulating certain groups and cultures by both allowing them to exist and practice their lifestyles, yet at the same time, keeping them ‘out of sight and out of mind.’ Power, in Foucaultian terms, gives a formative role to culture, which is the capacity to shape and organize people (Bennett 1998:50), making cultural resources and practices important to governmentality\(^2\). This process of regulation though cultural resources essentially comes about through the creation of domains and regimes of truth (Bennett 1998, Lacombe 1996), which are

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\(^2\) Bennett’s (1998:53) interpretation of governmentality is the set of distinctive apparatuses and programs of government which, through regimes of truth, aim to involve people actively in self-government.
the physical and social environments that conduce those practices.

Based on this, this paper raises three questions relevant to a discussion of power and
governmentality embedded in spaces and cultural practices: 1. how does Chester Street Dance
Club provide a ‘space’ or ‘domain’ (Lacombe 1992) for the practice of liberation? 2. What are
the characteristics of the patrons who frequent C. Street and how do they interact with the
environment? 3. What accounts for the marked differences in demography and behavior on
different nights at the club and how is this evidence of the presence of power and regulation of
society? The answers and discussion to these questions, following Burawoy's (1998)
methodological prescriptions for setting observations into dialogue with theory, should provide
an insight into the function of cultural practices as a resource for power and governmentality.

**Chester Street Dance Club**

Chester Street Dance Club is located in an old, two-storey building that formerly served
as a fire department and subsequently as a funeral parlor. It is the only club on Chester Street,
with most of the other downtown bars being located elsewhere in Champaign. The exterior of the
club has a large black canopy with the words “Chester Street Dance Club” in small white print.
The windows and doors are covered with posters advertising themed nights like “Industrial
Goth”, “Drag Night”, “Studio 54”, “Ladies Night”, and “Open Talent”, among others, posters
that are unlikely to be found in any other place, including conventional bars and clubs. The club
itself has three main sections, with an additional upper level that overlooks the dance floor. The
main area of the club is the dance floor area, which is surrounded by a small number of tables
and chairs, as well as two pool tables. At one corner of the dance floor is a small bar. The third
section of the club is a smaller area, sectioned off by a glass door, which had a larger bar and
more places to sit. This section was more like a separate room, probably to provide a more
casual, relaxed environment for patrons who wanted to get away from the more strenuous, energetic space of the dance floor.

After attending a Drag show at the club on a Sunday night, my friend and I were having a conversation about how we felt watching some of the people we observed, and he was describing his feelings of disgust at the sight of large, grown men dressed up as women and prancing around the stage like divas. My friend was fairly animated about his feelings; this made me wonder about my own. I have to admit that I felt a certain degree of awkward discomfort when a drag queen had walked up to me and smiled to say ‘hi’, although I did not feel the extreme revulsion that my ‘all-American’, white male friend claimed he felt. I remember feeling another form of discomfort several nights earlier, on a Wednesday night when the club did not charge cover fees and promoted cheap drinks. On that night, the demography of the patrons underwent a very sudden and startling change. On each of the previous nights that we had visited the site, the crowd was predominantly, if not completely, made up of white people. On this Wednesday night, however, the patrons were predominantly African American, and this change sparked a number of questions. It was as if the entire club had undergone a change - in place of a gay club with cheesy pop dance tracks and lots of white people was a club with loud, hip-hop music filled with African Americans. I recall the dance floor resembling something out of a rap music video, with men and women dancing in hyper-sexual, aggressive ways. A couple, for example, was dancing in a form of ‘sex-simulation’, with the man being very aggressive and dominating, pushing his partner to the floor and pinning her.

It was not so much the predominance of Black people at the place, but the ‘racialization’ of behavior and actions, or culture, that took place on that night that made us feel so out of place. We were out of our depth and confused as to how to react and respond in this environment. On
my part, being a foreigner new to America, I could somewhat accept the confusion and awkwardness I felt. I had never been in such a setting before. However, being an American, born and raised, it was somewhat surprising to note the reactions and feelings of my friend. It was as if he was seeing these things for the first time in his life, and he was not having a positive reaction. In his own words, he described his experiences as “feeling like a minority for the first time.” It was not a reaction based on race or gender, but a reaction towards the cultural practices we witnessed. How it that such cultures can simultaneously exist yet is so well concealed from our daily consciousness?

Culture, according to Bennett (1998:61), is dependent on and determined by social relationships of class arising from the organization of economic production. Bennett argues that cultural forms and practices are deployed governmentally as ‘programs of social management’ (1998:61). The implications of culture’s ‘formative role’ (Bennett 1998:50) is that as citizens, human beings have the ability to construct cultural practices and performances based on their social positions, but at the same time, they are shaped and organized by their positions on the social ladder. Bennett (1998: 51) goes on to describe culture as mechanisms of language and representation that work to shape social relations by organizing the framework of meaning which govern the conduct of social agents. This leads to Foucault’s ‘governmentality’, which is the set of distinctive apparatuses and programs of government which, through regimes of truth, aim to involve us actively in the government, management and development of ourselves (Bennett 1998:53). Regimes of truth are processes of ‘meaning production’, where social meanings are constructed based on grids of visualization, vocabularies, norms and systems of judgment, involving practical and technical forms of expertise, from which we dictate what are right and wrong forms of conduct (Bennett 1998:54). Forms of expertise are subjected to particular forms
of validation and translated into particular technical forms through their inscription within particular technical apparatuses (Bennett 1998:54). This definition implies the presence of an authority (expert) who is not focused on the control and domination of people, but the observation, surveillance and recording every aspect of the social body. It is this process that gives rise to the development of fields such as sociology and the human sciences. In practice, cultural studies become ways in which cultural technologies and techniques are expected to act on the social to bring about specific kinds of changes or stabilities in conduct. Viewed in these terms, culture is more than a historical inevitability that is rooted in tradition. It becomes a dynamic, ever-changing process that involves constant re-interpretation and performance. Rose defines it as the ‘ensemble of arts and skills entailing the linking of thoughts, affects, forces, and techniques that do not simply manufacture and manipulate, but also order being, frame it, produce it, make it thinkable as a certain mode of existence that must be addressed in a certain way’ (Cited in Bennett 1998:54).

Foucault’s conception of cultural technologies (Bennett 1998), divided into technologies of power and technologies of self, lend well to an explanation of how certain cultural practices arise. Technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends for domination, are responsible for the objectification of the subject (Bennett 1999:59). Culture operates through the technologies of self, which “permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts and conducts, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity wisdom perfection or immortality” (Bennett 1998:59). These two technologies operating in tandem indicate that culture is potentially both a source for regulation and liberation, where human beings are capable of ‘regulating’ themselves
in attempts to find satisfaction in one way or another. I interpret this as the capacity, through social relationships, for us to shape and be shaped by our environment, social and physical, in ways that would suit our needs and desires. The implication is that people are afforded liberties over their preferred lifestyles and practices within certain spaces. Referring back to Michael and Stills’ (1992:876) theory, these provisions from our environment are ecological ‘affordances’, although in this case, the affordances are not limited by power-knowledge or governmentality, but by the human organisms actual bodily capacities. Still and Michael’s conception of ‘affordances’ places the human capacity to resist mainstream norms outside of power, which is what proves to be problematic as an explanation of cultural practices, because this means that people should be able to form resistance at any point and in any place simply as a matter of choice, by taking advantage of their environment in unorthodox ways. Lacombe (1998:333), on the other hand, situates resistance and liberation within the dynamic processes of power, by arguing that the potential for ‘revolt and resistance’ is necessary for the exercise of power. There does seem to be room for freedom and liberation to some extent. The notion that culture is something that allows us to be governed without restricting our freedom means that we, as citizens, are able to seek out lifestyles that suit us and make us happy, or at least comfortable, and block out those that we struggle to deal with.

The definitions of culture so far serve to explain, to an extent, the types of performances and practices that we were able to witness on our visits to C. Street. People do tend to behave in ‘liberated’ ways in this space. By this, I mean people acting and behaving in ways that do not necessarily conform to accepted notions of ‘normality’. They are able to carry out their lifestyles, whether as Goths, homosexuals or cross-dressers, in an engagement of ‘play’ (Michael and Still 1992), which is the process where “ordered sequences of behavior are disrupted, exaggerated,
repeated and reassembled" (1992:882). Cross-dressing was very popular during Drag Show night, for example. My initial discomfort at seeing large, grown men in women’s clothing was somewhat blunted after seeing just how many drag queens were present. My friend, however, was complaining about his disgust and even felt the need to throw up at one point. It was these reactions that made me realize just how isolated and hidden the gender-bending performances of cross-dressers are from the larger public sphere, even in this liberal society. The other patrons, obviously more used to these alternative behaviors, were nowhere near as uncomfortable as we had been. They were comfortable in the space, indicating that these practices had become normalized within this ‘domain with its regime of truth’. This ‘gay club’ affords people the chance to engage in alternative cultural practices, but this is where the theory of affordances falls short. The theory suggests an all-encompassing depiction of the environment, not just limited to specific spaces. Any space is a resource for resistance. If this is so, then the presence of so many alternative lifestyles and practices within one place, C. Street, should not happen. The fact that these various groups are able to come to C. Street, and nowhere else, to ‘perform’ their cultural practices indicate that liberation and resistance are not as deregulated and ‘free’ as Still and Michael argue (1992). Their theory, in short, does not quite explain the seeming ‘invisibility’ of such cultural practices, like cross-dressing, in the public eye, a phenomenon that, to me, indicates the presence of governance and some form of power in operation.

**Liberation and Resistance within Power**

Looking at discussions of governmentality and power, Bennett (1998) places the notion of cultural resources in the context of relations of power which usually involves modifying the ways in which cultural forms and activities are governmentally deployed as parts of programs of social management. This again reinforces the formative capacity of culture, but in a broader
sense, it means that culture can be utilized as a resource for the government of society in order to reach certain ends. Governmentality is characterized by the diversity of objectives which it pursues, objectives which derive from and are specific to differentiated fields of social management rather than resting on some unifying principle of central power (Bennett 1998). It is not simply a matter of public governance, but is also apparent in the growth of private institutions and organizations, of which C. Street may be regarded as an example. There is no emphasis on the problems of political obedience, but rather a concern with the knowing, regulating and changing of the conditions of people in limitless ways (1998:55). Power and governmentality are not bent upon control and restriction, but on the liberation of human behavior through which they can be regulated. The liberation of behavior allows for the observing, recording and analyzing of cultural practices, a process that leads to the rise of fields of knowledge called the social sciences, which are crucial to social management. To be cliché, ‘knowing is always better than not knowing’.

In order to know and manage society, there needs to be ways in which culture is ordered and allowed for the optimization of its practices to bring about stability in life. Lacombe (1996) extends Foucault’s notion of power as a mechanism for life, involving strategies that both constrain and enable agency. This makes up the constitution of the modern subject through subjectification (Lacombe 1996:340), which are practices of liberation. Regulation through subjectification, or in other words governmentality, is achieved by blurring the boundaries between formal and informal social control, which Lacombe (1996) describes as the “thinning of the mesh and the widening of the net”. Spaces, for example, are provided for different cultural practices, customized to suit the purposes and needs of diverse populations, which on one hand affords a liberated space, while on the other, segregates various groups distinguished by their
practices, allowing them to be analyzed and studied more efficiently, and hence enabling them to be governed. Power is an energy that is deployed through the social body, where it creates a condition where attempts to give people greater freedom tends to become its opposite—social control that is meant to insure the public good (Lacombe 1996: 333). The optimization of public good requires us to be classified, specified, categorized and quantified and the best way to achieve this is to allow the production of reality, which power does, including the domains of objects and the rituals of truth, from which the knowledge of the individual can be gained (Lacombe 1996:334). By providing a space for various sub-cultures to manifest themselves, even if they are regarded as counter-cultures, it makes it easier to manage and regulate the individuals who are members of those groups, using the logic that they would be able to find some form of satisfaction from being able to practice their cultures and thus be of greater use to society’s needs. This is crucial to an understanding of liberalism and biopolities as concepts that uphold the principle of maximal economy with minimal government (Lacombe 1996). Again, this reinforces the theme of regulation through liberation. Liberalism, which supports freedom and civil liberties, is derived from laws of human rights rather than governance (Lacombe 1996: 345). This can be seen in the example of the homosexual. Upon the birth of the homosexual as an individual, such people find themselves in a position to resist by showing off, scandalizing, or exaggerating, while also being at the mercy of discourses that named their conditions (Foucault 1990:45). Simon Caney (2007: 152) puts forth the definition of an egalitarian universalist liberalism as the doctrine that persons should enjoy the complete set of liberal civil and political rights, such as rights to democratic government, freedom of association, freedom of conscience, and the freedom to choose what conception of the good one pursues so long as it does not violate the rights of others. Where there is power, there is resistance, for power is the network of
relations of force between individuals. This is termed ‘strategic reversibility’ (Lacombe 1996),
the strategy of power knowledge to function both as instruments of control and as points of
resistance. Foucault (1980), as an example, suggests that homosexuals are able to appropriate the
objectifying discourse that labels them as freaks, gays, and queers and use it to their own
advantage (subjectification).

Lacombe’s analysis of Foucault’s power-knowledge and governmentality addresses two
key issues pertaining to C. Street. Firstly, the theory suggests that practices of liberation and
resistance only occur within certain domains that are created specifically for the regulation of
members, in which case their cultural practices become a resource for governmentality. This
explains the diversity of the demography and behavior observed at the club. The ‘domain’
changed each night, in accordance to the themes, and these changes served as beacons for
different patrons. Examples of these changes were the difference in music being played, special
drink offers, and lighting. For example, on “Industrial Goth Night”, loud, industrial music was
accompanied by very dim lighting and strobes. The crowd was made up predominantly young
white people dressed up as “Goths”- dark clothes, heavy make-up, blood red lipstick and
eyeliners, with tattoos, piercings and spikes. On Wednesday night, when there was no cover
charge and an especially cheap drink special was being offered, the demographic was completely
different, as most of the patrons were African American. Both these examples are evidences of
how C. Street operates as a ‘domain’ for cultural practices. The second important element of
Lacombe’s theory is the issue of utility of cultural practices as a form of governmentality to
ensure public good, based on the principles of liberalism- maximal economy with minimal
government (Lacombe 1996). As a domain for alternative lifestyles, C. Street allows members of
sub-cultures to participate and express themselves in relative security and freedom, thus allowing
them to be happy. This means that members are more likely to self-regulate and avoid engaging in such alternative practices in other spaces, where such things might not be received positively. The obvious example from C. Street would be the act of cross-dressing, which is extremely taboo in most other spaces.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to study the relationship between power, space and cultural practices by using Chester Street Dance Club as a case study through application of the extended case method (Burawoy 1998). My observations of C. Street were used as data to analyze the presence of power in the cultural practices of liberation and resistance, in order to arrive at a broader conception of cultural practices as being resources of power and governmentality. I relied upon two theoretical approaches, as outlined by Michael, Still and Lacombe, to guide my analysis of C. Street and to answer the three major questions of the research.

Using C. Street as a case study for the two theories, I sought to ask the questions of how regulation occurs on the basis of social class through Bennett’s conception of culture as a tool for programs of social management, and whether the ‘seclusion’ of this space is indicative of larger, embedded processes of power. It seems to me that there is an isolation of cultures within cultures apparent in the manner in which C. Street functions as a space that affords liberated behavior and alternative cultural practices, yet through this means, allows members of these sub-cultures to be effectively kept away from public view. On this, Still and Michaels’ ‘affordances’ theory (1992) fails to address the apparent seclusion and confinement of certain groups within a particular space or domain. The fact that these liberated acts and practices only occur within these domains seem to be strong evidence that resistance and liberation are not situated outside of power, but
within it as a very important element for the regulation of society, which is what Lacombe (1996) argues for. C. Street becomes a potential tool of social management, where the maintenance of a segregated and stratified society is sustained by utilizing cultural resources that keeps people happy and in their places.

So how does this relate to us? On one level, it throws into question our conventional understanding of culture as based on traditions and norms. It also questions our understanding of value systems, particularly the way we judge other people's behaviors and lifestyles. The implications of these arguments are that our cultures might be ways in which we are governed and regulated so as to maximize our use to society, based on our positions in social space. It means that culture is used to keep us within certain domains and others in theirs—where each person is able to freely practice their lifestyles, enabling themselves to be studied and analyzed. This is a crucial aspect of the Foucaultian approach, which highlights the processes of inclusion and exclusion from groups as forms of regulation. If we wish to govern people effectively, it must be done with their consent, and they must be allowed to practice whatever culture they and it becomes imperative that those practices be observed. The most effective means of doing this is by providing secluded spaces for people to practice culture. This implies separation, categorization and institutionalized marginalization of groups, or at least sub-cultures, without the presence of a direct coercive force. This is informal social control. With this in mind, it might be useful to ask questions about how we look at sub-cultures and alternative lifestyles, and why we react in the ways we do towards them.
References


