

## Neoliberalism and its Homophobic Discontents [1]

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**SUMMARY:** This article addresses a lack in both queer and anti-neoliberal political critique: on the one hand, queer theoretical approaches neglect questions of production and class, on the other hand economical analyses all too often ignore the question of sexuality. The author argues that this blank is symptomatic for the current regime that reins the construction of sexual identities and he asks why it is so difficult to do otherwise. While religious fundamentalists, nationalist and racists unanimously reject both homosexuality and neoliberalism, official neoliberal discourse in the European Union includes tolerance of homosexuality within its list of allegedly European values. In Germany and in the Netherlands, right wing liberal policies thus give anti-homophobic struggles a nationalist and racist stance, constraining them to co-opt neoliberalism, consumerism, nationalism and racism. Finally the article discusses whether the notion of precariousness

could help to link economic and sexual concerns such a way that the dialectics of individuality and risk taking in neoliberalism are illustrated.

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By the following reflexions, I'd like to address the question of coalition building between sexual and social politics. The very conceptual distinction between "sexual" and "social" might well be contested because sexuality is an entirely social phenomenon. Though, for lack of a better term, when saying "social," I mean politics that are centred on issues of labour, exploitation and redistribution. Most frequently, that kind of politics is considered to as traditional left wing politics. However, I'd also like to take into account resistance against neoliberal working conditions from the right.

Let me start with an observation: It is striking that global resistance against neoliberalism is mostly homophobic or, at best, leaves the critique of heteronormativity completely out of its political agenda. For instance, left wing opposition to neoliberalism all too often neglects issues of gender and sexuality.[2]

Moreover, religious fundamentalists of all kinds as much as nationalists and racists ally in perfect harmony around their rejection of both homosexuality and neoliberalism. On a global scale,

resistance to neoliberalism is very often connected to a critique of Western societies' immorality, as it includes sexual emancipation, calling instead for family values, piety and patriotism (as we know all too well from the Polish example). Gay men, lesbians and (other) emancipated women are depicted as the winners or even the agents of capital's globalisation, of the precarisation of labour, and of "the corrosion of character" (Sennett 1998) that culturally goes along with it. Here the homophobic imaginary deeply intersects with anti-Semitic clichés. Of course this view is incorrect as soon as we consider not only a privileged minority of white middle class (male) homosexuals living in metropolitan areas. However, this particular group does exist and it is equally true that there is a strong involvement of gay and lesbian lobby groups with the neoliberal bare agenda. Some activists and theorists have therefore fostered the term "queer" as a counter-term to "gay," which to their minds stands for the co-optation of the gay and lesbian movement with neoliberalism and consumerism.

The case might be slightly different in the US where Christian fundamentalists, neocons and neoliberals have forged a very peculiar coalition. Yet, this only proves that queer communities can apparently be positioned in various ways within different "makings" of modernity and that neoliberalism does not necessarily conflate with gay, lesbian and transgender emancipation. Rather, queer

communities can get instrumentalised for different political goals. In Europe they currently symbolise for modernity. Thus, the former German coalition between the Green Party and the Social Democrats depicted the same sex partnership bill as a national project of modernisation though only a small minority has so far made use of it. Furthermore, official neoliberal discourse in the European Union includes tolerance towards homosexuality within its list of allegedly European values. As a result, in Germany and in the Netherlands right wing liberal policies give anti-homophobic struggles a nationalist and racist stance, constraining them to co-opt neoliberalism, consumerism, nationalism and racism, whereas queer alliances around sexuality, class, and migration are rather disarticulated.[3]

In the Netherlands Pim Fortuyn forged an anti-multicultural coalition around the issue of homophobic discrimination. After Fortuyn's killing in 2002 the Dutch government drafted one of the strictest immigration policies in Europe. A film produced by the Dutch government explains the demands of the new entrance examination to potential immigrants and therefore shows two men kissing in a meadow explaining that heterosexuals and homosexuals have the same rights in the Netherlands. Some observers have convincingly argued that footage of gay marriage in Dutch immigration videos serves the purpose to deter Muslims from

immigrating to Holland.

In Germany the dispute on immigration and integration has adopted a similar course. A local section of the Christian Democrats has suggested a questionnaire that ought to be filled in by applicants for naturalisation. One of the questions should have been how the applicants would react if they knew that their son was gay. It is astonishing that deputies of a party that opposed gay marriage in the German parliament now want to include tolerance of homosexuality in its catalogue of anti-Islamic values. Strangely enough, these guidelines for immigration were welcomed by the local section of a major gay and lesbian lobby group while almost all other political parties condemned them. The lobbyists argued that when a major German Party acknowledges sexual self-determination as part of the national cultural identity that should definitely be approved. But at the same time they were foreclosing the connection to anti-immigration policy. Similarly, in the new member countries of the European Union the claim for sexual rights is made with recourse to Europeanness and to the institutions of the European Union and their policy.

On a global scale sexual emancipation is frequently linked to the profusion of neoliberalism, for example in Latin America, India and Southeast Asia. Very often queer people prefer neoliberal working

conditions to more traditional ones because they enable them to live untraditional lives even if they don't earn more money. They therefore, even unwillingly, often represent indeed a kind of vanguard of neoliberal transformation.[4]

Neoliberal management has understood that condition and addresses queer people in their concept of "diversity management". Neoliberal management strategies acknowledge and encourage difference among employees.[5] Identity difference is used as a resource of motivation and exploitation. As a result, queer identities are both essentialised and exploited, for it is the "othered," "deviant" identities that represent diversity while the norm stays unmarked. Power difference is disarticulated as cultural diversity. In the economic logics of diversity management, tolerance by the dominant is exchanged with extra exploitation of the subordinated.

Neoliberal state administrations pursue a similar logic and include same sex couples in their welfare policy. Responsibility for social care is delegated from the state to so called "rainbow families". Long before gay marriage was achieved in Germany, homosexual relationships had already been acknowledged by the state when alimony had to be paid to the jobless partner. As a result, neoliberalism's neo-familiarisation includes also gay men and

lesbians into its notion of family. This may be considered as an historical break with the former fordist isolation of queer individuals from their families of origin.

Would the alliance of queer politics and neoliberalism therefore be the call of the day? I would like to problematise this view by highlighting the price of this coalition. Moreover, I aim at understanding why issues of queer and feminist politics are so successfully disarticulated within a political critique of economy and labour and why affirmative approaches to the neoliberal system include sexual diversity and gender equality.

In political coalition building, a certain unity is expected in order to allow political agency. However, this very need for unity very often censures possible fault lines of dissent out of the agenda. Addressing questions of power difference is suspected to undermine the unity and power of political organization. This objection has been very common among the traditional left referring to the Marxist distinction of main and subordinate social contradictions. According to that, the contradiction between labour and capital is the main one whereas any other contradiction, such as sexuality and gender, is regarded as merely epiphenomenal of capitalism.

But I do not think either that it is right to distinguish, as does for example Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth 2003), between politics of recognition on the one hand and politics of redistribution on the other hand. Sexual emancipation, Fraser argues, is politics of recognition while she considers labour dispute as the latter. Yet, sexual politics are as much politics of recognition as they are politics of redistribution.[6] Capitalist economy relies thoroughly on sexuality and gender, and sexuality and gender are deeply entangled in it from within their very hearts. Gender and sexual identity are not added as a further source of exploitation to an otherwise sex- and genderless form of labour. Rather, workforce is provided with a gendered body and sexual desires that are regulated and systematically exploited by capitalism. As queer scholars like Ann McClintock (1995) and Renate Lorenz (2007) have illustrated, desire is not only gendered but also thoroughly racialised and classed.

Various scholars, such as Donald Lowe (1995), have argued that in so called late capitalism sexuality has been transformed from constituting a sexual *identity* to representing a sexual *lifestyle*. By consequence, sexuality is now figuring as an individual consumer choice at the free market of lifestyles. This very consumerist perspective creates a strong bias for the white male middle class experience. Ann Pellegrini (2002) has pointed out that there is

a narrative that conflates capitalism and homosexual identity. However, she objects, this is only true for a very reductive view of homosexual identity, especially a white and male one that can economically and culturally afford to live the "gay lifestyle". Precisely, Rosemary Hennessy (2000) has repeatedly put under scrutiny how, within capitalism, consumption often seems coextensive with visibility. That's why on the other hand sexuality's involvement with labour stays in the dark.

In the early nineties, one of the impulses of queer politics in the West came precisely out of the fact that queer people didn't feel represented by the gay and lesbian communities because they could not or were not willing to afford the so called "gay lifestyle". Gayness was so much entangled in commodity capitalism that the very concept had become unacceptable for a considerable part of the younger generation.[7] Nonetheless, growing queer visibility in advertising continues to be mistaken as a realistic picture of society. As a consequence, political discourse draws the image of people getting the straighter the poorer they are. According to that, homosexuality seems to be a kind of luxury that only wealthy people can afford.

On the occasion of a public discussion in Berlin in May 2006 with Tomasz Bączkowski, one of the organisers of the Warsaw Parada

Równości, he said about the presence of German sympathisers in Poland that Polish people had the impression that all Germans were rich. If they saw that so many Germans were not only rich but also gay, that could only help the gay and lesbian cause because people would associate gayness with richness, and that would advance their acceptance. Analogically, the art critic Paweł Leszkowicz argued at a queer conference in Warsaw in May 2007 that Polish homosexuals should embrace consumerism as their only trusted ally. I'm wondering why they are so sure about this assumption. Isn't there also clear evidence that, at the same time, a strange mixture of homophobic and anti-Semitic cliches is revitalised, one that binds sexual, racial and religious difference to the excesses of capitalism?

Interestingly, in Germany it was precisely a radical leftwing newspaper ( *Die junge Welt* ) that reported about the participation of German activists at the Warsaw parade of 2006 in an utterly homophobic way. It criticised the German lobby groups for not being left enough, for arrogantly exporting neoliberal EU supremacy and not addressing the real problems of Polish people. I think that this critique can be very legitimate but I'm very worried about how sexual rights issues become a claim of second scale that can only be put forward when more "substantia" struggles of redistribution have been accomplished. When talking about poverty in the context of global labour division, the call for queer rights is then perceived as an

indecent claim that is inappropriate for the people in question, as if sexuality wasn't a basic need for all and necessary for survival. Homophobia within the left movement can by such arguments be disguised as advocacy for the people most in need.

In conclusion, I'd like to discuss how to link economic and sexual concerns such a way that the dialectics of individuality and risk taking in neoliberalism are adequately addressed. I'd thus suggest to consider a recent, yet incomplete coalition that is built under the umbrella term of "precarity" or "precarisation" and that tries to highlight the diversity of social insecurity: insecurity that results from queerness, from gender, from race, from migration and from neoliberal working conditions. To my knowledge, there are activists in German and English speaking countries, in France, Italy and Spain who use the term. This concept tries to illustrate the multiple and often contradictory ways in which individuals get subjected to neoliberal working conditions. But "precarisation" does not only mean the worsening of working conditions but also growing individualisation of professional biographies.

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