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Sexual politics

# Homonationalism, Heteronationalism and LGBTI Rights in the EU

- Features - Sexual politics -

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**This year's pride marches in Europe have taken place under the shadow of a threat, compounded by the recent terrorist attacks in Western Europe (Paris, Brussels and now Germany) and the slaughter at Pulse nightclub in Orlando. We have been urged not to give in to fear, while at the same time we've been told that undisclosed security precautions are being taken. The route of the Paris pride march was drastically shortened, supposedly for security reasons. It's not clear whether the attack in Orlando was motivated by religious fundamentalism or was more the product of anger and anguish about the attacker's life and sexuality. Either way, it could be just a matter of time before a similarly murderous anti-LGBTQI attack takes place in Europe.**

Europe boasts that it's the best place in the world to be lesbian, gay, bi or trans. So how did we get to this point: having emerged into the proud light of day, still worrying about what's lurking in the shadows? I believe that our situation as queers is rooted, at least in part, in the crisis of the European Union's own project, which goes back to contradictions that were inherent from the beginning. Enzo Traverso has pointed out that May 8, 1945 "a founding moment for a new Europe" sowed deep divisions in the historical memory of Europe's citizens and subjects. Celebrated in France as a day of victory over fascism, May 8 is remembered in Algeria (and among immigrants of Algerian origin in France) as a day when French troops massacred Algerians in the city of Sétif. For Eastern Europeans, May 1945 was the eve of the triumph of Stalinism and the beginning of long decades of subjugation. [1] All of these divisions "between the European and African shores of the Mediterranean, between triumphant democratic Europe and embattled colonial Europe, between Western and Eastern Europe" are now having repercussions for LGBTQI people, who have recently been identified as particularly European.

LGBTQI Europeans have benefited from legal gains since the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam mandated the European Union combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Yet as the EU has also acted as an instrument of neoliberal policy, producing growing inequality and spreading crises, LGBTQI people have fallen victim to anti-EU resentment and resurgent nationalism. Especially in regions where the EU and its dominant Western European member states are resented, LGBTQI people have become targets of resentment. [2]

Some people originating from Europe's former African and Muslim-majority colonies, scapegoated as agents of prejudice, have been rejecting the European model of lesbian/gay emancipation. Houria Bouteldja of France's Party of the Natives of the Republic (Parti des indigènes de la République, PIR) caused fierce debate in 2012-13 when she refused to champion the "white agenda" of same-sex marriage. It's too simplistic to typecast Bouteldja as a Muslim homophobe. She argued that while there are same-sex practices in French immigrant neighborhoods, they do not imply the existence of a universal gay identity. She rejected the charge that a refusal to come out is evidence of homophobia. Instead she portrayed many LGBTQI immigrants' choice for a cross-sex marriage, with either a straight or a closeted lesbian/gay partner, as a legitimate act in defense of a family and community order threatened by racism. Bouteldja declared that unlike issues of unemployment, police harassment, discrimination, or housing, same-sex marriage "does not concern me" as an immigrant. Few immigrants showed up for the big demonstrations for or against same-sex marriage, she said, because they knew that even if it passed its impact in immigrant neighborhoods would be minimal. [3]

And though Bouteldja's views are by no means universally shared in immigrant communities, she and her party are not alone. Another French person of immigrant origin, Madjid Ben Chikh, rejected the invisibility that Bouteldja would impose on him as a gay man, but endorsed her dismissal of the "white" gay agenda. [4]

A comparable dynamic has been at work in many of the Eastern European countries admitted to the EU in 2004 and

2007. Before the 1990s, none of these countries had ever had anything like the extensive Western European gay commercial scene or community organizations. The restoration of capitalism made the development of a gay scene possible “in neoliberal conditions of rapidly increasing inequality” so that Prague, for example, became a hub of Western European gay sex tourism, and Eastern European male sex workers began appearing in Western European cities like Amsterdam. At the same time the EU and its member states funded a new gay civil society in their own image, and increasingly put political pressure on Eastern European governments to model their legislation on a Western European pattern. In the cynical words of LGBTIQ activist Scott Long, Eastern European governments see the EU as “a rich eccentric uncle” whose “every crotchet must be humored,” even if this means improving the treatment of “homosexuals or other nonexistent creatures.” [5]

All this has brought many benefits to Eastern European LGBTIQ people. At the same time, it has helped reactionary nationalists like the Polish Catholic right, who are homophobic for many reasons, to manipulate popular resentment of the West to promote anti-LGBTIQ campaigns. LGBTIQ marches have been banned in several countries including Latvia, Moldova, Poland, Russia and Serbia, and violently attacked by the far right, often with police connivance, where they have been officially permitted. [6] Well-intentioned Western European solidarity can sometimes backfire and reinforce the image of Eastern European LGBTIQ people as alien. The first Moscow Gay Pride in 2006 consisted, according to an international trade union observer, of “a handful of Russians supported by foreign elected officials and gay activists.” [7] At least one Russian LGBTIQ leader, Nikolay Alekseyev, has warned that calls to boycott Russia to protest the 2013 law against “gay propaganda” risk having the same effect of fueling repression. [8]

In short, sexuality serves as a marker today between Western and Eastern Europe. Catholic and Orthodox churches, and political currents linked to them, are capitalizing on resentments, among Eastern Europeans, of the consequences of capitalist restoration and neoliberal inequality, with LGBTIQ people serving as favored targets. In this climate, violence against Eastern European lesbian/gay pride events has been partly the work of neo-fascist groups who believe that the EU is “run by ‘fags’.” [9]

Both in Eastern Europe and in communities of immigrant origin in Western Europe, anti-LGBTIQ prejudice, however vicious the forms it takes, needs to be seen as partly a form of resistance to what Jasbir Puar has called “homonationalism”: the instrumentalization of LGBTIQ [10] rights as a tool of imperial domination. [11] Images of exuberant gay sexuality and celebration have been enlisted as icons of the kind of freedom the so-called “West” has to offer, to contrast with the “backwardness” and repression that are attributed to Eastern Europe, the Islamic world, and immigrants. And many LGBTIQ people have embraced this iconography. The upshot of this homonationalism, or at least its intended upshot, is what’s been called a “seemingly seamless articulation of queerness with an imperial nation state.” [12] Particularly, but not only, in countries like the Netherlands [13] and Denmark, as scholars like Paul Mepschen have observed, where both same-sex partnership rights and anti-immigrant sentiment are strongly developed, homonationalism has been key to consolidating and taming lesbian/gay identity. In Europe more generally, acceptance of LGBTIQ people has become “the sign of the European Union’s benevolence” and a sign of European superiority. [14]

European ideologies of secularism strike a particular chord among LGBTIQ people. Condemnations of religiously-motivated homophobia and transphobia fall on fertile ground in our communities. Resentment of religious bigotry runs deep for many LGBTIQ people, particularly among those of us who suffered from it during our own Catholic, Protestant or Jewish upbringings. Indignation at anti-LGBTIQ persecution on the part of fundamentalist regimes and movements elsewhere can seem like a logical consequence of opposition to Western Europe Christian bigotry. When this leads to support for LGBTIQ people who are taking the initiative to organize themselves in Eastern Europe or in Muslim communities, it can be welcomed as an expression of solidarity.

But a problem arises when white Western Europeans’ resentment is projected away from their own context and experience and focused on the rest of the world, on the prejudiced “others.” Stigmatization of Eastern Europeans or Muslims in general is not going to help LGBTIQ people in Eastern Europe or of Muslim origin. It is particularly

counterproductive to portray Islam as inherently more homophobic than Christianity, a notion that is flatly contradicted by the historical evidence. Arguments can become poisonous when they are generalized to all people of Muslim origin, independently of any positions individuals take on LGBTQI issues. This ideological prism seriously distorts interpretation, as Will Roscoe and Stephen Murray have pointed out, and does no justice to the historical “variety, distribution, and longevity of same-sex patterns in Islamic societies.” [15]

LGBTQI movements have increasingly been harnessed to a political discourse that obscures colonialism and global inequality, while focusing instead on the allegedly unique homophobia of non-Western countries. In countries like the Netherlands and Denmark, right-wing forces have shown, since 2001, how Islamophobia can be used to win right-wing influence in mainstream lesbian/gay organizations – unwittingly abetted by Islamic fundamentalists like Rotterdam imam Khalid El-Moumni, who in 2001 declared that Europeans who condoned same-sex marriage were “less than pigs and dogs.” [16] There is a vicious circle of escalating antagonism between the new homonationalism of LGBTQI communities and what can by analogy be called “heteronationalism”: the adoption of anti-LGBTQI attitudes as an expression of insurgent national, ethnic and/or religious identity.

This escalating antagonism is part of the context for the wave of terrorist attacks we’ve seen recently, especially the attack in Orlando – or at least for the way the attack was perceived in different parts of the world. And we have to understand that although the hundreds of people dead and wounded in terrorist attacks have been innocent victims – inappropriate and wrongful targets – it’s not true that Europe has nothing to do with the dying and suffering today in the Islamic world. Across the Mediterranean from Europe, and especially in Syria, violence is raging on a much greater scale. Hundreds of thousands of people have died and millions have fled over the past five years. And European governments, while far from solely responsible, have been complicit. European air forces, alongside the U.S. Air Force, have been bombing targets in Syria and killing people, including innocent civilians, without bringing peace any closer.

If we’re going to make sense of the vicious cycle of homonationalism and heteronationalism, and specifically of queer people’s vulnerability as potential targets of terrorism, we have to take account of Europe’s everyday racism, its legacy of colonialism, and the ways that queers are – usually unwittingly and involuntarily – caught up in these dynamics. To avoid false debates: none of this justifies killing people just because they are at a concert or a nightclub. But the kind of repressive measures and ethnic and religious polarization we are seeing in Europe today do nothing to protect innocent civilians, queer or straight. On the contrary, measures like these fan the flames of conflict and resentment.

What LGBTQI response could help break the vicious circle of homonationalism and heteronationalism? In a word: solidarity. Meaning, queer activism in defense of civil rights, for peace, against all forms of prejudice, for social justice. Which, I would argue, would have to be queer activism against neoliberalism, which is a major root cause of social injustice.

Homonationalism needs to be more broadly understood as one dimension of “homonormativity,” which Lisa Duggan described over a decade ago as a gay mindset that does not “contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them.” [17] Duggan made the connection between the imposition of a lesbian/gay norm and the neoliberal society we’ve been living in for the past 35 years. She showed that homonormativity, within the overarching framework of a heteronormative society, has a class dimension: it reflects the ways that a layer of lesbian/gay people are adapting in order to occupy a secure niche within the neoliberal order. The integration of some lesbians and gays into the existing family institution through same-sex marriage and adoption provides an example, especially in the context of the privatization of care in neoliberal societies.

Finally, as a global facet of homonormativity, homonationalism – the integration of normalized LGBTQI people as family members, citizens and taxpayers of the dominant nation-states – also has a material dimension. When the

world's geopolitical and economic hierarchy makes the living standards of an LGBTQI Israeli many times higher than that of a Palestinian, that gives LGBTQI Israelis a material stake in their integration into the Israeli nation-state. And when a country like Afghanistan is largely marginalized from the neoliberal world economy – helping to fuel social dislocation, multidimensional oppression and decades of war – US LGBTQI support for post-9/11 US wars shows a failure to grasp the shared interests of victims of neoliberalism worldwide, even when that support is sincerely meant as an expression of sympathy for sexually nonconforming Afghans.

All this suggests a darker side to “pride” in Europe today: LGBTQI people are sometimes proud, not only of what they are, but also of what they are not (backward, alien, marginal). This kind of pride is, in fact, nothing to be proud of. Pride should be founded on solidarity: not the imposition of an agenda by the supposedly advanced on the supposedly backward, but full equality in struggle – meaning for example that Eastern Europeans and immigrants take the lead in deciding on tactics and demands in the fight against their oppression. On a global scale, an agenda for liberation should be jointly crafted on the basis of our full diversity, equality and mutual respect, linking LGBTQI equality to full economic and social equality. This would be the best antidote to both homonationalism and heteronationalism in Europe.

August 31 2016)

### [Public Seminar](#)

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[1] Enzo Traverso, ‘L’Europe et ses mémoires: Trois perspectives croisées’, *Raisons politiques* 2009/4 (no. 36), pp. 157-8, 163-4, 161-2, citing Dan Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse. Über Geltung und Wirkung des Holocaust* (Tübingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

[2] Spain and Portugal, on the other hand, have seen rising popular acceptance of LGBTQI rights even as their peoples have suffered from EU-imposed austerity – largely, I think, because sexual liberation started to gain popularity in those countries when the dictatorships fell in the 1970s, before the EU became much of a factor.

[3] Houria Bouteldja, <http://www.indigenes-republique.fr/...> (2013)

[4] Madjid Ben Chikh, ‘<http://www.minorites.org/index.php/...>’, *Minorités* no. 159 (2013)

[5] Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 184-5.

[6] Martin Moriarty, *Trade Unionists Together for LGBT Rights* (Ferney-Voltaire/Brussels: Public Services International/Education International, 2007, p. 7).

[7] Maxime Cervulle and Nick Rees-Roberts, *Homo exoticus: Race, classe et critique queer* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), pp. 36-7.

[8] Nikolay Alekseyev, ‘<https://www.rt.com/op-edge/russia-g...>’ RT News (2013)

[9] Herzog, *op.cit.*, pp. 190-1.

[10] Q is deliberately omitted here as “queer” doesn’t seem to me a subject of legal rights.

[11] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), xxiv, 38-9.

[12] Jordana Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo, ‘Introduction: Queerness, Norms, Utopia’, *GLQ* 18/1 (2012), p. 10.

[13] Paul Mepschen, Jan Willem Duyvendak and Evelien Tonkens, 'Sexual Politics, Orientalism, and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands', *Sociology* 44/5 (2010); Suhraiya Jivraj and Anisa de Jong 2011, 'The Dutch Homo-Emanicipation Policy and its Silencing Effects on Queer Muslims', *Feminist Legal Studies* 19/2 (2011).

[14] Roderick A. Ferguson and Grace Kyungwon Hong, 'The Sexual and Racial Contradictions of Neoliberalism', *Journal of Homosexuality* 59/7 (2012), p. 1060.

[15] Will Roscoe and Stephen O. Murray, 'Introduction', in Murray and Roscoe (eds.), *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History and Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 4-6.

[16] Herzog, *op.cit.*, p. 201.

[17] Lisa Duggan, 'The New Homonormativity', in Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson eds., *Materializing Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2002), 179.