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## Assimilationism, Sexual Nationalism, and the Backlash Against Gender and Sexuality

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Fifteen years ago my co-authors and I wrote an article discussing the politics of sexual nationalism in the Netherlands (Mepschen et al., 2010). We argued that gay and lesbian emancipation had come to center almost solely on the political idea of the “integration” of alleged sexual and religious others into the Dutch moral community. We pointed out that the Dutch case was exemplary of wider European developments. In various European countries we have witnessed complex transformations in the relationship between the nation and the question of sexual democracy (Fassin, 2012). Lesbian and gay rights and discourses have been weaponized to frame Western Europe as the “avatar of both freedom and modernity” (Butler 2008, 2) and depict its Muslim citizens and others with a migration background as backwards and homophobic. In the words of the queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007), who coined the term ‘homonationalism,’ gay rights have been recast as an “optic, and an operative technology” in the production and disciplining of Muslim Others (See also Rahman 2014.) Cases of homophobia among Muslim and migrant citizens are highlighted, treated as archetypal, and cast within Orientalist narratives that underwrite the superiority of European secular modernity. Homophobia is increasingly represented as peripheral to Western European culture (Mepschen 2017). As I see it, we still live in the same historical moment: the notion of sexual nationalism is more relevant than ever. But at the same time, things are changing. Before we get to that, a short overview of what has been discussed in the last fifteen years.

One of the most plangent issues in Dutch society today precisely is the prominence of the rhetorics of sexual democracy in the construction of (post)migrant cultural and religious alterity and, conversely, of imaginaries of Dutch national community and identity (Dudink, 2012; Mepschen et al., 2010; Wekker, 2009). Neonationalist populists, but increasingly also the so-called “centre right” and parts of what is left of the “left”, have staged their battles against ‘Islamization’ and immigration in terms of a clash of civilizations: between ‘western’ tolerance and sexual intolerance; between equality and gender inequality, between secularism and religion (especially Islam) (Beekers and Schrijvers, 2020; De Cesari and Kaya, 2021; Farris, 2017; Mepschen et al., 2010; Mepschen, 2016; 2017). In the process, they reinforce an image of battered, subjugated women, lesbians and especially gay men in multi-ethnic neighborhoods, lacking the support of left wing, allegedly multiculturalist elites (cf. Mepschen, 2016; Uitermark et al., 2012).

These facts signify a transformation in the social location of discourses of sexual democracy, a shift in the meaning of homosexuality in relation to nationalism. As George Mosse has shown in his study on *Nationalism and Sexuality*, the moral universe of modern nationalism was strictly heterosexual: homosexuals were ‘not only thought to symbolize the confusion of the sexes, but also sexual excess – the violation of a delicate balance of passion’ (Mosse, 1985: 25). Throughout the modern era, sexual deviants, including homosexuals, were the objects of political and religious constraint and repression and were represented and produced as deviant, perverse, sick and criminal others (Altman, 1971; D’Emilio, 1983; Foucault, 1990; Seidman, 2001; Weeks, 1981; 1999). The modern nation, conceptualized as a homogeneous racial community, relied on its naturalized and racialized others (Dudink, 2012; Mosse, 1985); “One of these was the homosexual, whose sexuality was assumed to be both determined from deep within the body, and legible from the exterior and surface of that body” (Dudink, 2012: 260). In a process of interarticulation with the racialized Jewish other, “the homosexual, too, was, to certain extent, racialized, and homosexuality emerged as a partly racial category” (Dudink, 2012, 261; cf. Mosse, 1985).

Starting in the late 1800s, gay worlds, subjectivities and social movements came into being, and sometimes even flourished (Chauncey, 1994; Hekma, 2007; Katz, 1983; Steakley, 1975; Van der Meer, 2007; Weeks, 1977), but homosexual sex remained criminalized and lesbian and gay lives and communities policed. The rise of gay liberation, anti-authoritarian politics and new modes of consumption in the 1960s, and the concomitant reshaping of regimes of self (Drucker, 2015; Foucault and Sennett, 1981; Meijer, 1996; Tonkens, 1999), did not initially rupture the symbolic relation between respectable

nationalism and deviant or abnormal homosexuality: rather, the proliferation of gayness in the 1970s and 1980s reinforced homosexuality's alterity vis-a-vis the nation. The AIDS-crisis, disproportionately affecting gay men, threatened, initially, to strengthen the imaginary of gay men's radical sexual alterity and bring back ancient ideas about illness as punishment (Sontag, 1989; cf. Bersani, 1987). And although gay rights movements were relatively and increasingly successful in Europe - and certainly in the Netherlands, their success depended to a certain level on assimilation and "normalization" (Mepschen et al. 2010; Seidman, 2001; 2002). As formal gay rights were won, the symbolic relationship between nationalism and homosexuality remained intact. Or, in the words of Steven Seidman: "Normalization is made possible because it simultaneously reproduces a dominant order [...] Legitimation through normalisation leaves in place the polluted status of marginal sexualities and all the norms that regulate our sexual intimate conduct" (Seidman, 2001: 326).

There is no doubt that Seidman's words remain valuable in the contemporary Netherlands, as becomes quite apparent in the discrepancies researchers in the Netherlands find between discursive, symbolic support for lesbian and gay citizenship *rights*, including the right to marry and adopt children, and affective, bodily responses to public expressions of gay affection (Buijs *et al.*, 2011; Hekma, 2007; 2010). Moreover, especially in recent years, we have witnessed the rise of anti-queer and especially anti-transgender politics Graff & Korolczuk, 2022; Bassi and LaFleur, 2022; Grinspan et al, 2023; Verloo, 2018; Paternotte and Kuhar, 2017; Sosa, 2021). Indeed, we have seen a decrease in sexual and gender tolerance in the Netherlands (GGD 2024).

The achievement of formal rights notwithstanding, the "polluted status of marginal sexualities" has clearly been left in place - not only in the Netherlands but also in other parts of Europe where formal civil rights are now a reality. This suggests that scholarly approaches to the research on homophobia, that take quantitative data on the support of gay citizenship rights as a starting point, while important, can never do the full work of understanding the various articulations of homophobia that come into being in a globalizing, neoliberal world. We live in a time in which sexual diversity is on the one hand legitimated, authorized and produced by the market, a process that is reflected in a policy agenda focusing on individual rights, including lesbian and gay and (to a lesser extent) transgender rights, whereas the various affective, emotional and practical dimensions and articulations of 'homophobias' disappear from public, political and scholarly sight (cf. Drucker, 2015). This produces a simplified and reductive sense of what homophobia entails. By taking an approach that does not break with neoliberal assumptions about individual autonomy and personal freedom, and thus focusing only on individual rights, it is very easy to slip into what Bourdieu calls the "scholastic fallacy" (Bourdieu 2000 [1997] to assume that "people in action are at the same time people in contemplation" (Desmond, 2006: 390). In other words, while quantitative data on the broad support of lesbian and gay rights in the Netherlands have an important story to tell, I argue that to fully understand current homophobias we need a processual and relational approach, looking at praxis and everyday life as opposed to only formal, contemplated ideas and discourses that are grounded in social rules and norms and formal boundaries. When I discussed, in various articles, papers and presentations, especially the aspects of "normalization" and assimilation I foregrounded in my work, I was not always taken very seriously. While I warned that the entanglement of sexual democracy in neonationalist discourse was superficial and instrumentalized, especially by the far right but also centrist liberals and conservatives, I noticed people shrugged that aspect of my analysis off. Dutch society was seen as postprogressive: when it came to LGBTQI liberation no further steps needed to be taken. Except for the ever more forceful "integration" of migrant and religious Others.

Now, it is of course unambiguously clear that certain articulations of homosexuality have entered the symbolic macrocosm of Dutch and European nationalisms - to the extent that far right parties like the Dutch PVV and the French RN now pay lip service to lesbian and gay rights. This means that the social location of certain, dominant articulations of

homosexuality have shifted. As Dudink puts it: “somewhere along the road from its nineteenth-century articulation as a racial category, inflected with Jewishness and blackness, and its present meanings in debates about Islam and multiculturalism, homosexuality became white” (2012, 262). This shift demands that we rethink the social and cultural analysis of homosexuality, and sexual democracy, beyond its conceptualisation as dissenting and resistant, as linked to the 1960s and 1970s global countercultural new left (Butler, 2008; Mepschen *et al.*, 2010; Puar, 2007). It also demands that we take seriously the meaning of racialization in relation to sexuality in the Netherlands.

But, as said, things have in fact been changing. More recently, we have seen the rise of anti-gender politics and a growing opposition to sexual and gender alterity in broader terms. Moreover, we have witnessed a growing resistance to the sexual education of youth - in the Netherlands and beyond (cf. Balkenhol and Van den Hemel, 2019; Duin, 2024; Verloo, 2018). From opposition to the category of non-binary as a legitimate gender identity to demonstrations against drag-queens reading for kids; from protests against talking about sex and sexuality with young people to the rise of trans-exclusionary politics - we are witnessing a strong backlash against gender and sexual freedom in various parts of the world. This is not limited to conservative regimes like Orbán’s in Hungary, Putin’s in Russia or to far right but mainstreamed politics in Italy, the US and the UK, but these ideas and imaginaries have gained strength in various parts of “homonationalist” Western Europe (Sosa, 2021; Paternotte and Kuhar, Wielowiejski, 2020).

Antigender activists often use particular, military metaphors: battle, fight, trap, siege - to describe their struggle against gender and sexual nonconformity. This leads them to refer to transactivists and -persons as aggressive and violent - and as a threat to supposedly normal women. Beyond that we see a focus on social reproduction - in which the national and the traditional nuclear family once again plays a key role. This goes hand in glove with resistance against queer kinship. The Belgian far right political formation *Vlaams Belang* is, for instance, strongly opposed to gay/lesbian adoption and marriage, while at the same time embracing basic lesbian and gay rights as “acquired rights” (see Van Raemdonck *et al.*, 2022).

All of these developments are part and parcel of a focus on the restoration of male power and a resistance to feminist understandings of gender. We see a new focus on the figure of the traditional and an opposition to the shift from understanding democracy as a “brotherhood” to more gender inclusive understandings. In the most general terms, it can be said that antigender movements have opposed the gains of “68” - the sexual revolution and feminism, which they have delineated as undermining community and as responsible for individualism and the instability of everyday life. Graff and Korolczuk mention Jacopo Coghe, vice-president of the Italian organization *Pro Vita e Famiglia*, at the World Congress of Families in Verona in 2019, proclaimed that his movement is engaged in a struggle against: “Ideologies of death that destroy man and human reality. If the mother is no longer the one who gives birth and the father is no longer the one who begets, children can be bought and gender is decided within the mind, and if every desire becomes a right, this means that at stake is not only a new model of society but a new paradigm of humanity (pp 15)” Indeed, the word gender is used as “a currently unfolding anthropological revolution that—if not stopped in time—will eventually erase all differences between the sexes, depriving women, in particular, of their right to fulfill their biological destiny and pursue happiness (Garbagnoli 2017: 154; cf. Bassi & la Fleur, 2022; Bracke *et al.*, 2018).

While in the debate about homonationalism a decade ago, the sense of a possible backlash was met with scepticism, we now see a return to ideas about natural law, the natural order of things and “common sense” - going hand in glove with the introduction of the notion of “cultural marxism” as a threat — responsible for a culture of radical permissiveness (*vis-a-vis* pedosexuality for instance). The deregulation of sexual norms now supposedly leads to the destruction of culture - which is also held responsible for the demographic and spiritual suicide of “the West”.

So, what is to be done? Our current research on gender and sexuality should take the consequences of normalization and assimilationism seriously - and heed the warnings against what Abeera Khan in a recent announcement of a public talk has referred to as “the anticipatory relief that is projected onto the modes of recognition that are produced from this de-abjectification.” (Khan, 2024). The new ways LGB subjects have been folded into national regimes of visibility and citizenship, seem to go hand in glove with the rise of new modes of exclusion of gender and sexual non-conformity, especially queer, non-binary and trans identities. What we are witnessing is a backlash against the politics of normalization: we therefore need a radical rethinking of sexual nationalism.

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