

Same-sex marriage and the neoliberal European agenda

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The passage of laws on same-sex civil union in a series of countries since the 1990s, and more recently laws on same-sex marriage, has been presented as the culminating achievement of the movement for lesbian/gay emancipation. Civil union legislation in France and Germany followed mobilizations by LGBT movements that brought hundreds of thousands of people into the streets, in response to the injustice felt when survivors were thrown out of their homes after their same-sex partners' deaths from AIDS and other blatant examples of inequality. Yet curiously, the first two European countries to open marriage to same-sex couples, the Netherlands and Belgium, did so without any substantial LGBT mobilization. In fact the Dutch LGBT movement had traditionally advocated 'pluriformity of relationships' rather than same-sex marriage, while the Flemish LGBT movement took a critical distance from Belgian same-sex marriage legislation. Apparently something else is going on besides victory in an LGBT emancipation struggle.

I would argue that same-sex marriage enables European social democratic and green parties to give LGBT people a degree of equality and themselves a progressive aura at a much lower cost than a more general extension of retirement benefits, immigration rights and so on would involve. Championing lesbian/gay rights also helps distinguish the European Union from the nearby Islamic world and (less sharply) from the US under George W. Bush. Claiming a modern, secular European identity can help LGBTs win victories over anti-gay forces like the Catholic Church, which fiercely opposed civil unions in Portugal, is mobilized massively against same-sex marriage in Spain, and has been intensely (and so far successfully) resisting any prospect of the centre-left government's instituting civil unions in Italy. But the social-liberal agenda implicit in this version of European identity can become a barrier to future progress towards sexual liberation.

Gay and neoliberal agendas

The specific kind of lesbian/gay identity that has taken centre stage in Western European lesbian/gay communities is socially, historically and culturally specific. It focuses on gays whose primary emotional as well as sexual ties are with people of their own sex (so this leaves bisexuals not quite at centre stage). It focuses on gays who do not marry and form heterosexual families (so this excludes many men who have sex with men or women who have sex with women 'on the side'). It focuses on gays who do not radically change their gender identity in adopting a lesbian/gay sexuality; this of course pushes transgender people *far* from centre stage.

The first lesbian/gay legal victories in the 1970s facilitated the growth of mass, open lesbian/gay communities. In the 1980s and '90s, particularly among some middle-class social layers, commercial gay scenes continued to grow. This helped to consolidate lesbian/gay identity, particularly among better-off gays and lesbians living in two-income households (especially men). Yet at the same time since the 1980s, lesbian/gay identity has been put under pressure, fragmented or put in question to some extent around Europe, in the last analysis by the social consequences of a long-term slowdown in economic growth. This slowdown, beginning with the 1973-75 recession, put an end to the prosperity and social progress that made the rise of lesbian/gay communities possible in the first place.

Above all, this long slowdown provoked a neoliberal offensive by employers and governments. Among other things, this has meant increased share and power of capital at labour's expense and an increase in inequality among and within countries. A widening social gap has opened up between better- and worse-paid workers, native-born and immigrant, employed and unemployed. And as David Thorstad points out in his article, attempts from the left to resist these changes suffered one defeat after another. All this was bound to have consequences for LGBT people, communities and movements.

As a result, a political agenda gained strength among lesbian/gay movements that focuses on legal reforms to the exclusion of long-term or deeper social change. The people who staff and lead the largest lesbian/gay organizations sometimes pay lip service to long-term, deeper change, but in practice they follow a purely reformist agenda, because of the weight of money and social pressure behind it. It has won significant support among big political parties, particularly social democrats, greens and left-liberals, including parties in many recent or current Western European governments. In social-democratic parties in particular, the adoption of reformist pro-gay positions has been part of a far-reaching social transformation of these parties, which without exception have taken a greater distance from their traditional working-class base. David Paternotte's article in this volume describes in detail how this process took place in the Socialist Party of French-speaking Belgium.

Lesbian/gay rights have also been picked up by the European Union, particularly since they were written into the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam. The European Union's leaders, some of whom would like to turn the EU into a great power, need to foster some sort of European identity. But what can the 'European identity' consist of? Not a strong labour movement and welfare state — even though these are European traditions; the EU's Lisbon Agenda aims at retooling them in the interest of greater competitiveness in the global economy. One kind of answer that is taking shape consists of a series of human rights principles that don't actually cost money, such as secularism, opposition to the death penalty, decriminalization of abortion and formal elimination of antigay discrimination. All of these have been useful lately in distinguishing Europe from the US (at least from the 'red states' that formed George W. Bush's electoral base in 2000 and 2004) as well as from the Muslim world. So in a sense gay rights are part of the democratic decoration that is on offer to Europeans while their markets are forced open and many of their social protections stripped away.

This has gone together with some positive results, such as the striking down of anti-gay laws in a couple of EU countries and pressure to equalize same-sex and heterosexual ages of consent. Eastern European countries where lesbian/gay movements are still mostly weak have been put under pressure to eliminate their discriminatory legislation, with some success. But meanwhile the same centre-left political forces that have backed these reforms have taken part — more or less hesitantly, more or less shamefacedly — in an assault on poor people and minorities.

This is not of great concern to the layer of middle-class or middle-class-identified lesbian/gay people, who are making their careers or hoping for careers inside mainstream businesses and institutions. Many of these people would like to be able to pursue their careers in mainstream companies and

institutions while being open about their same-sex relationships, but for the rest prefer to minimize differences between them and middle-class straights. So the kind of gay agenda they support is limited to pursuing anti-discrimination measures, with 'gay marriage' as its keystone. An increasingly visible minority identifies with the secular right that is defined as 'liberal' in continental Europe — a significant proportion of Dutch lesbian/gay leaders now identify with the right-liberal VVD party, and there have been similar developments in a country like Denmark — or forces even further to the right — as in Italy, where the openly gay Enrico Oliari of the post-fascist National Alliance hoped (in vain) to become Berlusconi's Secretary of State for Emancipation.

Partnership laws are in this sense double-edged. Only the rise and strength of lesbian/gay movements have made them possible. Yet they are rarely lesbian/gay organizations' first priority or initiative. And in the forms that existing European centre-left governments have accepted partnership laws and pushed them through, they are also measures that fit into a vision of gay life in which gays become monogamous, moral and well-regulated and are squeezed into the straitjacket into a broader 'pro-family' agenda. Furthermore same-sex couples are supposed, by supporting each other financially, to contribute to the neoliberal privatization of social responsibilities.

Queer identity, a different Europe

The demand for same-sex partnership and even marriage (as in Holland, Belgium and now Spain), when presented as a demand for equal rights, is one that the LGBT community largely stands behind. But as I said at the beginning, actual levels of LGBT mobilization have been uneven. This is due in part to the limitations of the 'equal rights' that partnership laws grant. While, as David Paternotte says, feminist-inspired reforms have made civil marriage less unequal in legal terms than it was 50 or 150 years ago, it has had some definite shortcomings as a route to equality for LGBT people. For example:

- Even when the new laws have formally defined same-sex partnerships as marriages, they have in no case provided full equal rights to lesbian/gay parents. Lesbian/gay parents are often divorced from different-sex spouses and not always in new couples with same-sex partners. So far no partnership or marriage law has recognized birth mothers' female partners as truly equal. At best (as in the Netherlands) the law has offered only access to expensive, time-consuming adoption procedures.
- The new laws in fact recognize only a small subset of the sexual, emotional and living arrangements that exist among LGBT people.
- For those LGBTs who are not in couples and may not want to be part of couples, particularly for those who don't want to be financially dependent on someone else, partnership laws offer nothing at all.

Some segments of European LGBTs — particularly lesbian feminists, blacks and immigrants, and younger, lower-income, anti-assimilationist 'queers' — have reacted essentially by boycotting the whole issue of partnership rights. This reflects a different dimension of the gradual and partial fragmentation of lesbian/gay identity that began in the 1980s. While there are middle-class gays who are lukewarm about even a reformist agenda, for their own conservative reasons, they are other LGBTs who are critical of it for radical reasons — particularly among LGBT youth. The lower LGBT youth's incomes are, and the fewer their job prospects, the less on average they identify with or want to join the lesbian/gay community that has grown up since the 1960s and '70s. The kind of 'queer' politics that spread in the late 1980s and early '90s in rich English-speaking countries, the developed countries where social polarization is greatest, is largely the politics of a younger

generation that resisted disco culture, a bar-centred ghetto, and the kind of segregation that fit with 'minority-group' politics. In the new century, this queer politics has begun gaining support among a young minority in continental Europe. These young people are socially excluded from the assimilationalist mould. Other queers have rebelled against the dominant lesbian/gay identity because it's tended to exclude them sexually: bisexuals, transgender people, people interested in even less respectable kinds of sex, and so on.

Some contributors to this volume, like Marco Dell'Omodarme and David Thorstad, seem inclined to write off the whole struggle for partnership rights and same-sex marriage as irrelevant to an agenda for true sexual liberation. As René Scherer points out, however, it is possible to defend same-sex marriage against its reactionary opponents and at the same time criticize its conservative implications. A broader hearing might be won among European LGBTs by supporting the principle of equal partnership rights, while at the same time making demands that highlight the limits of what's been won so far. Socialist and radical LGBTs could for example organize to demand automatic parental rights for female co-mothers from the moment of birth — a proposal that has actually made in the Dutch parliament and will come up for debate again soon; or de-linking health care or welfare benefits from partnership status; or legal recognition for forms of cohabitation or co-parenting that don't fit into a narrow model of couplehood.

These kinds of demands could help build a stronger LGBT component of the left-wing opposition to the existing European Union. Even more important, they could contribute to rebuilding a radical LGBT movement with mass appeal in Europe, which aims to remove the fundamental social roots of this prejudice and inequality rather than just the symptoms of legal persecution and blatant discrimination are gone. Instead of societies where those who differ from the sexual norm are a tolerated minority, such a movement could fight for societies where non-normative sexualities are just as commonplace and just as visible as so-called normal heterosexuality, including in the media, in every bar and disco, at every school and in every family where a child is growing up.

P.S.

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