

# Queer sexuality, labour and nation

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## **Talk at the International Meeting Against Homophobia and Transphobia, Kaos GL, Ankara, 13 May 2017.**

Thank you for inviting me. It's an honour to be here. And in these difficult times for the Turkish people and especially for Turkish LGBTIQ people, I'm very glad to have a chance to stand in solidarity with you. I hope that what I have to say can be of some help to you in meeting the major challenges you face.

I come here as someone who has lived for 24 years now in Western Europe. At the same time, I believe that the LGBTIQ movement has to be an internationalist movement. Our situations in different countries are very different, but I believe that our destinies are linked. International solidarity is crucial. And for me, international solidarity is founded on an identification between queer people and all working people worldwide, a common identification with the international labour movement.

At this time in history, linking queer and labour struggles is not easy or automatic, especially in Western Europe. The last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were, especially in many European countries, years of progress for LGBTI people towards legal and social recognition and rights. At the same time those years were the apogee of the global neoliberal order, which weakened the global labour movement. There was a sense of linkage between gay men in particular - less for lesbians, still less for trans and intersex people - and capitalist subjectivity. The things gay men buy and the businesses we patronize have been a big part of our sense of community. So queer theorist Michael Warner, for example, has written that 'urban gay men reek of the commodity'. At the same time there was a dissociation among LGBTIQ people from labour, which many women and queers have perceived as traditionally marginalizing them. And to be honest, that perception has been based on reality. There has been and still is a lot of sexism and heteronormativity in the mainstream labour movement, even though there has been progress in many countries in recent years.

The outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008 shook and delegitimated neoliberalism. For a few months, for a year or two, it became possible in many countries, even in the mainstream media, to ask some searching questions about global capitalism and its weaknesses. And with good reason.

It's important to emphasize two things about neoliberalism. (1) Neoliberalism is not just a set of policies adopted, coincidentally, by virtually every government in the world. It is rooted in the crisis of the profitability that began in the early 1970s, and was and is a response to that crisis, aimed at restoring profitability. In that sense, to talk seriously about neoliberalism requires talking about capitalism. (2) Neoliberalism has been a failure in at least one crucial sense: in the core capitalist countries, neoliberal policies have not restored the growth and accumulation rates that prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s. Nor have neoliberal policies proved capable of sustaining the high growth rates that did exist in some 'emerging economies' - the BRICS and some other countries like Turkey - for a certain period. On the contrary, neoliberalism was at the root of the crisis that broke out in

2007-2008, first in the US and Western Europe, and with a lag of a few years in most of the rest of the world as well.

The outbreak of the crisis in 2008 seemed like a promising moment for the left, including the queer left. Before the crisis, the mainstream lesbian/gay movement had largely adopted an agenda of integrating the most prosperous and respectable lesbian/gay people into neoliberal societies, by allowing them to marry and adopt children and pursue middle-class careers. The crisis raised the possibility of going beyond this, of deepening an agenda for queer liberation, in alliance with labour and the left. This could have meant building on the most promising queer initiatives of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Like the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, which successfully challenged not only the South African government but even the World Trade Organization in its fight to win treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS. Like Queers for Economic Justice in New York, which fought for housing for the queer homeless. Like the rising movements of trans and intersex people and gender queers.

Unfortunately, this period of hope didn't last very long. It has become clear that despite its economic failures, neoliberalism has succeeded in other ways. For example, in fragmenting labour, by pitting better-paid workers against the worse-paid and workers with stable contracts against workers with precarious contracts or in the informal sector. Moreover, by putting the working classes of different regions and continents in direct competition with one another, global neoliberal economic restructuring has weakened the basic units of labour organization, weakened international labour solidarity, and weakened working people's sense of class identity. As a result, the labour movement, and political forces based in the labour movement, have been ill-equipped to take advantage of the crisis in order to challenge neoliberal policies and to challenge capitalism more generally.

Still, neoliberal policies are largely discredited, and so are the parties of the centre-right and centre-left that have been implementing neoliberal policies. So these policies and parties have come under increasing attack. But the attacks have increasingly come, not from labour or the radical left, but from the nationalist and populist right. The consequences for LGBTIQ communities have been mixed. In countries of the North, the right is torn between what Jasbir Puar has called homonationalism (instrumentalizing LGBTI rights in the service of the imperial nation) and more traditional right-wing forms of heterosexism. We see this in the contradictory sexual politics of Trump in the United States, of Le Pen in France, and in the far right in the Netherlands, the country I live in. Meanwhile, in countries of the South, the right has often attacked LGBTI communities in the name of defending threatened national cultures, often linked to religion.

Coming from the global North, I feel that it's important for me to say that heteronormativity is not just a problem of the global South. In the Netherlands, where I live, the far right and reactionary forces in society today blame anti-LGBTI attitudes on immigrants. They disguise their anti-immigrant racism particularly as a critique of Islam. Now, right-wingers in different countries can have more or less reactionary attitudes to LGBTIQ people. They range from those who say they only want to repeal marriage equality, like Trump, to those who punish homosexuality by throwing people from high buildings, like Daesh. But to be clear, viewed from a broad historical perspective, sexually repressive ideologies preached in the name of Christianity or Judaism are essentially no better in this respect than right-wing ideologies preached in the name of Islam. All the major monotheistic religions have traditionally had a view of sexuality based on perpetuating a male-dominated family. Sexual emancipation will not come from a critique of any one religion. It requires fighting for a secular democratic politics, which insists that public policies must not be based on any religion. For LGBTIQ people this is vital; it can be a matter of life and death.

The global right-wing offensive places LGBTI communities before new challenges. It suggests the need to reconsider queers' relationship to both labour and the nation. In a founding document of the

modern socialist movement, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels took a very complex and dialectical attitude to nationality. Their most famous statement on the subject was, 'The working men have no country.' But in the same passage in the same document, they stated, 'Since the proletariat ... must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national'. They concluded, 'In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another will also be put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to.'

This is a nuanced and complicated passage. It provides a basis for both the defence of national sovereignty against domination by foreign capital, and for the defence of those – workers and minority peoples, and even women and queers – whom the capitalist nation tends to subordinate.

If I may, I would like to illustrate this with a few words using Turkey as an example. As you all know of course, the city we are meeting in today began its modern history as the capital of Turkish national resistance to a Western European imperial enterprise, an attempt to divide and subjugate the Ottoman empire. And the most radical wing of the international socialist movement of those years supported the Turkish revolution against that imperial enterprise. Again, as someone coming from Western Europe, I feel it's important to say that that still today, queers and labour and progressives generally should defend Turkey against attitudes in Western Europe that are throwbacks to the old imperial arrogance. Today, for example, Western European right-wingers who always opposed trying to integrate tens of millions of Muslims with lower living standards into the European Union are seizing on the repression in Turkey as proof that they were right. In a confrontation between the nationalism of the rich haves and the nationalism of the poor have-nots, internationalists need to clearly reject the nationalism of the rich. And we need to make clear that our defence of democracy and human rights has nothing in common with the hypocritical discourse of the Western European right.

At the same time, defending national sovereignty and dignity by no means implies accepting the limitations of a specific national project. It is not clear to me, for example, that the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic was a gain for sexual liberation. The Ottoman gender order was of course deeply patriarchal, and the republic brought some gains for women, even if it rejected a truly feminist perspective of women's self-emancipation. But in adopting Western European models for its sexual legislation, the republic may in some ways have proved less tolerant of sexual diversity, at least among men, than the empire. And in defining itself as an ethnically homogenous state, the republic has proved less tolerant of linguistic and cultural diversity. Sexual minorities and national minorities should be natural allies in fighting for a republic that defines itself, not on an ethnic basis, but on the basis of universal, social, human values. And for me, it is the labour and socialist movement – if it can open itself fully to the sexual, cultural and human diversity of those who constitute it – that provides the best foundation and the strongest cement for the defence of those universal values.

What I am advocating is a dual agenda: on the one hand, queering labour and socialism; on the other hand, reviving class politics and socialism among queers. I believe this could help make possible both a new queer relationship to the nation and a new queer internationalism.

Thank you.

**Peter Drucker**

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