The Sexual Contradictions of the European Far Right

Wednesday 10 July 2019, by DRUCKER Peter (Date first published: 1 July 2019).

I'd like to begin, if I may, with a personal anecdote. For one thing, since I'm not a career academic it seems appropriate to begin somewhat less academically. For another, the anecdote sheds some light on my national and local context. This may help explain why the emphasis of my paper is a bit skewed relative to this panel's centre of gravity.

I live in Rotterdam, the second-largest city in the Netherlands, about an hour south of here. Rotterdam is also a stronghold of the Dutch far right. It was the home of Pim Fortuyn, the openly gay politician who could be seen as the founding father of the contemporary Dutch far right in the months before his assassination in 2002. Last year my partner and I went to Rotterdam Pride, which is held in September. One of the contingents at Pride was aligned with Rotterdam's far right. It had already taken part in Rotterdam Pride in 2017, under the name 'Gayservatives'. Last year it was called the Roze Leeuw ('Pink Lion' – the lion is a traditional Dutch nationalist symbol). Although there had been calls to ban it from Pride, it was not excluded. In fact, as a sign of the event's so-called 'inclusiveness', it had a place at the head of the march.

This background may help explain why my paper gives a lot of attention to the less homophobic side of the European far right. This may seem out of proportion. As the far right has risen in one European country after another – and unmistakably become a central concern in contemporary European politics (see Drucker 2018/2019) – examples of its attacks on LGBTI rights have multiplied. One might think that this has reduced homonationalism (to use Jasbir Puar's (2007/2017) term) on the far right to a few pockets.

In fact, I think there are at least three good reasons to include homonationalism as well as anti-LGBTI prejudice in a discussion of far right sexual politics. (1) A phenomenon that may seem marginal in analyzing the European far right as a whole can sometimes be far from marginal in some countries' LGBTI communities. The gay far right is a current within the broader gay right (see Drucker 2015, 283-91). And like the LGBTI centre-right, the European gay far right has been growing. Just as a poll in Brazil the week before the second round of last year's presidential election showed that 29% of self-identified non-straight voters planned to vote for the openly homophobic far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro (Brandimarte 2018), comparable levels of support among (in particular) white cisgender gay men have been revealed in polls in France and the Netherlands. (2) To understand far right sexual politics, we need to view it in its specific national contexts. A position that counts as anti-LGBTI in the Netherlands is not the same as an anti-LGBTI position in Italy, not to mention Poland. (3) As I have argued elsewhere (2016), even the most homophobic far right positions need to be understood, at least in part, as reactions to the official homonationalism of the European Union and the political forces that predominate in Western Europe. Both are part of the sexual politics of our era, and neither can be fully understood without the other.

This is the framework I propose as a matrix for analyzing three sexual contradictions of the European far right. The three contradictions are: (1) a contradiction between the fiercely anti-LGBTI

majority of European far right parties and a minority of more equivocal parties – this is largely a geographical contradiction, since the more equivocal parties are concentrated in north-western Europe. (2) There is a contradiction between the far right's virtually universal hostility to Muslims, which sometimes leads to attempts to win LGBTI support with anti-Muslim campaigns, and its slightly less universal hostility to LGBTI people. (3) In the case of the more equivocal parties, there is a contradiction between public support of LGBTI rights and the disproportionately anti-LGBTI attitudes of their voters. This can lead them to zigzag on LGBTI issues.

Let's analyze each of these three contradictions in turn.

(1) First, there is the diversity of European far right parties' stands on LGBTI issues. The contemporary European far right is sometimes inconsistent on issues of gender and sexuality. If we take Nazi Germany's fierce hostility to homosexuality (at least among 'Aryans') as the baseline, today's far right is not always in continuity with earlier fascist traditions. This diversity requires explaining.

To start with, what is the source of anti-LGBTIQ prejudice on the nationalist right? Some political scientists have described it as 'political homophobia' (e.g. Weiss and Bosia 2013). This seems to me to suggest an emphasis, implicitly and often unwittingly, on psychopathology, and on politics narrowly conceived. I have proposed a different term, 'heteronationalism' (Drucker 2016), to put the emphasis more on links to broader nationalist projects.

The contours of nationalism depend however on the social and political dynamics in specific nations. In Europe, I have argued (Drucker 2016), the situation of European LGBTI people is rooted, at least in part, in the specificities of the European Union's project and divisions between Western and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, reforms like decriminalization, anti-discrimination laws and marriage equality were national reforms rooted in national politics, predating EU policies. By contrast, although some Eastern European reforms had national dynamics – East Germany for example decriminalized same-sex sex a year before West Germany did – more recent Eastern European reforms have post-dated, and been popularly associated with, EU policies. These policies rest on the mandate in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam for the EU to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, reflected in the 1998 Employment Directive, the 2010 Toolkit and the 2013 Enlargement Strategy. (Slootmaeckers and Touquet 2016, 22-3)

In the cynical words of LGBTQI activist Scott Long (cited in Herzog 2011, 184-5), Eastern European governments treated the EU during the accession process as 'a rich eccentric uncle' whose 'every crotchet must be humored', even if this meant improving the treatment of 'homosexuals or other nonexistent creatures'. LGBTQI Eastern Europeans have benefited from legal gains as a result. But because many Eastern Europeans now see protections for LGBTI people as something imposed from outside, sexuality has become a marker between Western and Eastern Europe.

At the same time that the EU has been promoting LGBTI rights, it has also acted as an instrument of neoliberal policy in Eastern Europe. Among the consequences has been the growing presence of Western European corporations, cuts in social protections and increases in inequality. Neoliberal policies have been justified with a liberal ideology of freedom, incorporating LGBTI rights into a broader neoliberal agenda. This has helped make LGBTI people targets of anti-EU resentment and resurgent nationalism. In a reflex response to the instrumentalization of LGBTI rights by neoliberalism, heteronationalism has been instrumentalizing anti-LGBTI attitudes in the service of right-wing populism. In countries like Poland and Hungary, the right in power is playing on resentment of neoliberal ideology, while maintaining many key features of neoliberal economics.

As many observers have noted, deindustrialization in European and other developed economies,

beginning in the 1970s and more recently following the deep recession that broke out in 2008, has undermined many men's sense of masculinity. Many cis straight men blame this on women and LGBTIQ people. Richard Mole (2016, 104-8) has drawn on the work of George Mosse and Nira Yural-Davis to show how closely aggressive nationalism is linked to a concept of masculinity that naturalizes the patriarchal family, sees women as bearers of children and helpmates of men, and sees LGBTIQ people as weakening the nation's moral fibre. The far right in Eastern and much of Southern Europe has adopted this concept of masculinity. It has for instance taken up the pope's attack on 'gender ideology' and his defence of the traditional bounds of masculine and feminine roles. In keeping with this, the Eastern and Southern European far right fiercely opposes same-same marriage.

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"'. (Herzog 2011, 190-1) The Greek fascist party Golden Dawn has a similar dynamic, seeing LGBTI rights as part of the same EU agenda that has impoverished the Greek people. Political forces resisting the right sometimes mirror its sexual attitudes by linking defence of LGBTI people to a defence of European principles. Today in Poland, for instance, this is symbolized by the role of gay mayor Robert Biedroń as the leader of a new liberal movement in opposition to the right-wing, ruling, heteronationalist Law and Justice Party (PiS). (Miszerak and Rohac 2019) So far the predominant right-wing forces in north-western Europe have not adopted this kind of heteronationalism.

(2) However, the unequivocal heteronationalism we see in Eastern and much of Southern Europe is more muted in some far-right parties in north-western Europe. In some cases the far right's hostility to Muslims seems to be in tension with its hostility to LGBTI people.

Whatever their divisions on sexual issues, European far right parties seem united in its hostility to Islam. In Eastern Europe, the right appeals to Europe's Christian heritage to justify keeping Muslim refugees out. In Western Europe, the far right warns of the danger of what it calls 'Eurabia' to justify a hard line against immigration, against some social benefits that people in immigrant communities receive, and against some Muslim practices (like headscarves and halal food). But the implications of these anti-Muslim attitudes for far-right sexual politics in Western Europe are contradictory.

In her foundational study of 'femonationalism' – the instrumentalization of women's rights by conservative and right-wing forces – Sara Farris (2017) has shown how the French, Italian and Dutch right sometimes claims to defend European women, even those of immigrant origin, against Muslim men and other men of non-European origin. As Farris shows, the French, Italian and Dutch far right have all adopted this kind of femonationalism. In some cases a similar dynamic has led some north-western European far-right parties to adopt a degree of homonationalism, defending 'their' lesbian and gay people against a supposed Muslim threat.

Dutch columnist Bas Heijne (2005) has described the way a Muslim threat has been invoked to justify a turnaround on LGBTI issues by at least one figure of the Dutch right. In 1998, Dutch right-wing columnist Gerry van der List expressed disgust at what he saw as the sexual exhibitionism of gay men at the Amsterdam Gay Games. Yet a few years later the same Van der List expressed enthusiasm for gay men's no less exuberant behaviour at Amsterdam's Canal Pride, because they were in his eyes heroically resisting Islam. 'They're still the same naked blokes,' Heijne concluded, 'but now they stand for something different.'

Van der List's changed attitudes are reflected to some extent in the public standpoints of several north-west European far right parties. Flemish far-right leader Flip Dewinter, though he voted against same-sex marriage in the Belgian parliament in 2003, declared in 2014 that his party was now in favour. (Siegel 2017) French far-right leader Marine Le Pen declared to 'gay voters' in 2010,

‘I know that you suffer from discrimination. And who discriminates against you? Immigrants and Muslims.’ (Parrot 2017) In the Netherlands, Martin Bosma, an MP for the far-right Freedom Party (PVV), declared in a parliamentary debate on gay rights that ‘hostility to gays permeates Muslim culture’. Members of the far-right Sweden Democrats have led a so-called ‘Pride March’ through a predominantly immigrant Stockholm neighbourhood, chanting ‘No homo-haters on our streets!’ (Siegel 2017)

Hostility to Muslims has thus facilitated some north-western European far right parties’ adaptation to homonationalism: the instrumentalization of LGBTI rights in the service of broader right-wing nationalist projects. Yet their homonationalism should not be seen as a purely opportunist means of playing LGBTI voters against Muslims. It increasingly fits into a broader array of policies in ‘defence of the family’. Homonationalism needs to be more broadly understood as one dimension of ‘homonormativity’, which Lisa Duggan (2002, 179) has described as a gay mindset that does not ‘contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them’. Duggan has shown how homonormativity helps some lesbian/gay people integrate into existing family institutions, adapting in order to occupy a more secure niche within the neoliberal order. Far-right parties that have swung to support of same-sex marriage are part of a broader right-wing adoption of a homonormative outlook – which some gay voters like.

(3) Yet even the most homonationalist far-right parties find that claiming LGBTI rights for their nationalist projects puts them in tension with their own base. So this is a third contradiction of the European far right: between the partial, tentative homonationalism of its leaders and the persistent anti-LGBTIQ attitudes of its voters. An official Dutch study (Volkskrant 2011) concluded that despite the far-right Freedom Party’s public pro-gay statements, its voters showed more anti-LGBTIQ attitudes than those of any other major party. Recent experience suggests that far-right parties that move too far away from their base can lose votes. In both the Netherlands and Denmark, the predominant far-right parties – the Dutch Freedom Party and Danish People’s Party – have suffered major setbacks in recent elections, due in part by inroads made by parties staking out territory even further to the right. This helps explain how cautious and tentative far-right support for LGBTI rights can be. When for example the Dutch parliament recently voted to ban so-called ‘gay conversion therapy’, the two far-right parties initially gave signals that they would vote in favour, only to join the Christian parties in the end in voting against.

The French National Rally (formerly the National Front) has perhaps wrestled the most with contradictions between a leadership tempted by homonationalism and a stubbornly heteronationalist base. As we have seen, its leader Marine Le Pen was starting to appeal for gay votes a decade ago. Then in 2012, a centre-left government’s project for same-sex marriage elicited outraged, mass resistance. Le Pen’s party could not resist the temptation to claim leadership of the crusade against marriage equality. Yet neither would it give up its appeals to gay voters. In its programme for the 2017 elections it tried to square the circle, pledging to convert existing same-sex marriages into robust civil unions. Its leaders have continued to spin this position in different ways to different audiences.

Do all these contradictions mean that the far right is hopelessly incoherent and divided? I would suggest that beneath them there is an underlying unity of purpose. Just as the far right in the last analysis defends a corporate-dominated economic order, sometimes leavening it with populist social policies, in the last analysis it defends traditional families and gender roles, in some cases leavening its defence with a degree of tolerance for some LGBTI people and relationships. The fact that some lesbian and gay people are attracted to the far right’s vision suggests that LGBTIQ communities, like the far right, are cut across by contradictions.

References

Bosma, Martin [2007], ‘Anti-homogeweld zijn geen incidenten’, PVV contribution to parliamentary gay rights debate, https://pvv.nl/index.php/component/content/article/12-spreekteksten/906-anti-homogeweld-zijn-geen-incidenten-inbreng-pvv-debat-homo-emancipatie.html

Brandimarte, Walter 2018, ‘Why Many of Brazil’s Gay Voters Will Overlook Bolsonaro’s Homophobic Rants’, *Bloomberg*, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-27/gays-for-bolsonaro-why-many-will-overlook-his-homophobic-rants

Drucker, Peter 2018/2019, ‘Europe’s political turmoil’, *Against the Current* 197/198 (Nov.-Dec./Jan.-Feb.), https://solidarity-us.org/atc/197/europes-political-turmoil/ & https://solidarity-us.org/atc/198/europes-political-turmoil-part-2/

2017, Review of *The EU Enlargement and Gay Politics: The Impact of Eastern Enlargement on Rights, Activism, and Prejudice, Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 25: 2 (Aug.)

2016, ‘Homonationalism, heteronationalism and LGBTI rights in the EU’, *Public Seminar*, http://www.publicseminar.org/2016/08/homonationalism-heteronationalism-and-lgbti-rights-in-the-eu/

2015, *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer Anti-Capitalism*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket

Duggan, Lisa 2002, ‘The new homonormativity’, in Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson eds., *Materializing Democracy*, Durham NC: Duke University Press

Farris, Sara R. 2017, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*, Durham NC: Duke University Press

Heijne, Bas 2005, ‘Dezelfde blote kerels, een ander decor’, De Groene Amsterdammer 41, https://www.groene.nl/artikel/dezelfde-blote-kerels-een-ander-decor

Herzog, Dagmar 2011, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Miszerak, Martin and Dalibor Rohac 2019, ‘Poland’s progressive hope’, *Politico*, https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-progressive-hope-robert-biedron-mayor-civic-platform/

Mole, Richard C.M. 2016, ‘Nationalism and homophobia in Central and Eastern Europe’, in Koen Slootmaeckers et al. eds., *EU Enlargement and Gay Politics: The Impact of Eastern Enlargement on Rights, Activism, and Prejudice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Parrot, Clément 2017, ‘Le Front national est-il vraiment devenu “gay friendly”?’, *franceinfo*, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/marine-le-pen/le-front-national-est-il-vraiment-devenu-gay-friendly_2061745.html

Puar, Jasbir K. 2007/2017, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham NC: Duke University Press

Siegel, Scott 2017, ‘Friend or foe? The LGBT community in the eyes of right-wing populism’, *EuropeNow*, https://www.europenowjournal.org/2017/07/05/friend-or-foe-the-lgbt-community-in-the-eyes-of-right-wing-populism/

Slootmaeckers, Koen and Heleen Touquet 2016, ‘The co-evolution of EU’s eastern enlargement and LGBT politics: an ever gayer union?’, in Slootmaeckers et al. eds., *EU Enlargement and Gay Politics: The Impact of Eastern Enlargement on Rights, Activism, and Prejudice*, London: Palgrave Macmillan

Volkskrant 2011, ‘PVV-kiezer negatiefst over homo’s’, *Volkskran*t (6 Sept.), https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/pvv-kiezer-negatiefst-over-homo-s~b8465899/

Weiss, Meredith and Michael Bosia 2013, *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press

Paper presentation at the European Conference on Politics and Gender, Amsterdam, 5 July 2019

Peter Drucker