

Sexual Nationalisms

Gender, Sexuality and the Politics of Belonging in the New Europe

Since 1989, and even more so after 9/11, the rise of new nationalisms has been inextricably linked to a refashioning of the politics, identities and imaginaries of gender and sexuality in Europe. The old virile nationalism analyzed by George Mosse is now being reinvented in the light of a new brand of sexual politics. Feminist demands and claims of (homo)sexual liberation have moved from the counter-cultural margins to the heart of many European countries' national imaginations, and have become a central factor in the European Union's production of itself as an imaginary community. Rhetorics of lesbian/gay and women's rights have played pivotal roles in discourses and policies redefining modernity in sexual terms, and sexual modernity in national terms. How are these baffling shifts in the cultural and social location of sexuality and gender to be understood?

In Europe and beyond, the refashioning of citizenship contributes to the redefinition of secular liberalism as cultural whiteness. Homophobia and conservatism, gender segregation and sexual violence have been represented as alien to modern European culture and transposed upon the bodies, cultures and religions of migrants, especially Muslims and their descendants. In the process, the status of Europe's ethnic minorities as citizens has come under question. How can the entanglement of sexual and gender politics, anti-immigration policies, and the current reinvention of national belonging be analyzed? How are we to understand the appropriation of elements of the feminist and sexual liberation agenda by the populist and Islamophobic right?

The prominence of sexual democracy in the remaking of European national imaginaries requires bringing the critique of gender and sexuality beyond second-wave feminism and post-Stonewall liberationist perspectives. In late-capitalist, post-colonial Europe, struggles for sexual freedom and gender equality no longer necessarily challenge dominant formations; on the contrary, they may be mobilized to shape and reinforce exclusionary discourses and practices. The new politics of belonging is thus inseparable from the new politics of exclusion. This shift has not been without consequences for progressive social movements. Whereas in social and cultural analysis, nationalism has long been associated with male dominance, sexual control and heteronormativity, certain articulations of feminism and lesbian/gay liberation have now become intimately entwined with the reinforcement of ethnocultural boundaries within European countries.

As feminist historian Joan W. Scott recently argued when she coined the provocative notion of 'sexularism', new forms of sexual regulation have been introduced, especially targeting migrants, their descendants, and other 'non-whites'. Discursively defining the new national common sense, sexularism also operates at the level of the visceral, reaching deep into the sexual and racial politics, habits and emotions of everyday life. A required allegiance to sexual liberties and rights has been employed as a technology of control and exclusion – what could be called a 'politics of sexclusion'. Symmetrically, the Europeanization of sexual politics has entailed counter-reactions both inside and outside Europe. In Eastern Europe admission to the European Union has been conditioned on the acceptance of the new standards of sexual democracy, which sometimes led anti-European reactions to also frame themselves in sexual terms. In

Western Europe 'non-'whites can sometimes be tempted to identify with the caricatures imposed upon them.

An increasing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have begun to investigate the important shifts taking place in discourses of sexual freedom and gender equality across the continent. These shifts open up new arenas for ethnographic and other empirical research. What role do sex and gender play in various European nationalisms? In which cultural terms are sexual and gender boundaries articulated? What different trajectories can be discerned, and how can differences between countries be explained? What are the effects of these transformations at the level of the formation of community and subjectivity? How do these discursive shifts become tangible in everyday life? And how can sexual politics avoid the trap of exclusionary instrumentalization without renouncing its emancipatory promise?

In order to discuss such questions, we invite contributions grounded in ethnography and other empirical research along the five following themes:

1. The Nationalization of Gender Equality

In secular European imaginations of immigrants and their descendants, the Islamic headscarf in particular has been perceived as an axiomatic signifier of religious and gender oppression. It has been listed along other 'uncivilized' ills also attributed to ethnic minorities and disadvantaged neighborhoods, whether they be domestic violence, forced marriage, or female genital mutilations. In contrast, recently acquired milestones in gender equality, like the legal right to abortion, have been adopted by Left and Right politicians alike as new symbols of timeless national essences. What representations of gender have been conveyed by contemporary constructions of the nation? How have forms of domination between men and women been challenged and/or reproduced in neonationalist and secularist projects? In what ways are migrant women's lives affected by the entwinements of feminist discourses and movements with these projects? How have those women experienced and handled being framed as simultaneously the main victims and the main accomplices of the new Islamic threat?

Whereas religion is understood as operating at the level of the embodied, the habitual, material and visceral aspects of secularism are generally ignored or obscured. But what is the secular counterpart of the religious body? What does a gendered politics of secularism look like? At times, restrictive policies against women wearing headscarves have been justified in terms of the necessary limitation of religion to the private sphere; at other times, they have been framed in terms of gender equality and feminist ideals. Should this justificatory plurality be taken at face value, or does it point to deeper and more complex resentments against postcolonial and other 'non-white' migrants?

2. The National Politics of Sexual Freedom

In Europe, ideals and practices of sexual freedom have mostly been experienced as a tangible break with formerly hegemonic religious traditions and the restraints of community and family. In particular, gay people have sometimes been framed as the very embodiment of modern liberalism, as self-fashioning, unattached, and autonomous subjects. Why have such representations been so effectively tied to the nationalization of modernity in some countries but not in others? What have been the specific trajectories of such representations, and how have they affected lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender identified people in everyday life? What new

normativities have been shaped in the process? And what have been the consequences of these discourses for those who have been framed as the 'others' of sexual democracy – Muslims and ethnic minorities?

What have been the implications of such reinventions of sexual whiteness for everyday life in the global cities of Western Europe, and the sexual, cultural, religious and political diversity they offer? How have feminist and lesbian/gay movements been affected by these shifts in the social location of sexual and gender politics? What does 'race' have to do with the refashioning of sexual politics and identities? If sexual freedom and gender equality are being mobilized in a culturalist re-enactment of European racism, how does this affect white imaginaries and subjectivities? How are those (historically) excluded from whiteness affected by it? Which bodies come to be constructed in the sexual politics of neonationalisms? Which forms of 'queerness' are being authorized and which articulations of sexual otherness are being 'queered' and thus excluded from sexual normality? On what grounds does this occur, and how do these processes materialize in everyday life?

3. The Urban Geographies and Class Politics of Sexual Democracy

The interweaving of urban governance with sexual politics has been normalizing certain sexual spaces at the exclusion of others. In the context of an emergent urban entrepreneurialism and as part of gentrification processes, sexual others have been conscripted into urban politics and spatial renewal, while new hetero- and homonormativities have taken shape in the process. Gender representations have also played important roles in framing and representing cities as aesthetically and commercially attractive for business, tourists and aspiring residents. Simultaneously, certain brands of urban theory have celebrated gay men and women as the avant-garde of urban change, hence of the conquest of formerly working class and ethnic minority neighborhoods by bohemian middle and upper classes. What roles have sexuality and gay urban presence played in processes of gentrification? How have sex and gender been articulated in the urban governance of social marginalization?

How are the sexual politics of neoliberalism to be understood? What role does the market play in the sexual reinvention of nationalism and citizenship and in shaping new (homo)normativities? Is the stigmatization of Muslim migrants as sexually conservative a reenactment of discourses that in the past stigmatized working class communities as immoral, archaic or authoritarian? What do the class politics of 'sexularism' look like? What kinds of subjectivities are produced in new regimes of sexual progress?

4. The Sexual Politics of Immigration Policies

The ever-stricter immigration policies of Europe – both at national levels and at the level of the E.U. – have often been justified in terms of sexual democracy: migrants, especially from Africa or other Islamic countries, have been ostensibly kept out, not on racial, but on sexual grounds, in order to preserve the hard-won democratic values of Europe in the treatment of sexual minorities, and even more crucially, of women. As a consequence, these same migrants, whose matrimonial (forced, fake, etc.) or sartorial (hijab, niqab, etc.) practices have thus been under constant scrutiny, are expected to demonstrate a sincere adhesion to sexual democracy that is presumed inherent to European cultures, despite its very recent history and contemporary limitations.

How does such a constraint redefine the subjectivities of migrants – as well as that of their European partners? What does it mean for a woman of Islamic culture to be encouraged to reject her family's expectations in order to express her sexual modernity? What are the strategies available to migrant women and sexual minorities who attempt to resist oppression, even violence, while refusing to be co-opted by anti-immigrant, if not xenophobic or racist, politics? In other words, what are the interactions between the sexual logic of immigration policies and the sexual imaginaries and practices of the migrants thus targeted?

5. European Sexual Modernization and Its Discontents

Today, the borders of Europe are also sexual boundaries. Admission into the E.U. requires identifying with the agenda of sexual democracy. At the same time, almost by definition, non-European countries are suspect. Turkey's tradition of secularism largely inspired by the French historical model has not been sufficient to dispel the suspicion that this Muslim country is alien to European sexual democracy – as evidenced by the visible presence of the Islamic headscarf. In the same way, international campaigns against homophobia have largely been about the homophobia of others: the logic of human rights has focused more on legal repression than on legal discrimination – the penalization of homosexuality outside Europe rather than the exclusion of gays and lesbians from rights of marriage and adoption within Europe.

Conversely, the Europeanization of sexual democracy has fueled reactive nationalisms, not only in those countries that are bound to remain on the margins of Europe, such as the Maghreb, but also in recent E.U. members – regarding homosexuality in particular, for example, in Poland or Lithuania. How are European and non-European sexual politics reconfigured in this new context, i.e. what are the political consequences, in various countries within and outside of Europe, of this geopolitical context?

We invite all those interested to submit a one-page abstract and a CV by:
September 1, 2010.

Abstracts as well as questions can be sent to: Robert Davidson (R.J.Davidson@uva.nl)

Organizing Committee: Laurens Buijs, Sébastien Chauvin, Robert Davidson, Jan Willem Duyvendak, Eric Fassin, Paul Mepschen, Rachel Spronk, Bregje Termeer, and Oscar Verkaaik

Organizing Institutions:

Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality, UvA
Institut de Recherche Interdisciplinaire Sur Les Enjeux Sociaux, EHESS, Paris
Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, UvA
Research Cluster Dynamics of Citizenship and Culture, UvA
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