The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism

The rise of gay normality has had a political impact when it has been used to define a sexual politics that adapts to the sexual parameters of neoliberalism rather than challenging them. All the social and sexual components of homonormativity described in chapter 3 have political correlates, which this chapter will delineate. Homonationalism, for example, is a core element not only of lesbian/gay identity in imperialist countries, but also of the politics of the modernising right, including the gay right. Not only is normal same-sex partnership a foundation of today’s middle-class lesbian/gay lifestyle, a moderate approach to same-sex marriage is a cornerstone of the social-liberal politics of the lesbian/gay mainstream. Queer rebellion, too, is not only a subculture, but also a politics. The marginal place of queer sexualities in the homonormative-dominant regime makes queers a potential component of a broad anti-neoliberal alliance.

But so far, unfortunately, queer radicalism is marginal in the LGBT political landscape. No real break with the existing order is in prospect in the short term, and adjustments to it are ever more widely accepted. This makes the right and centre more serious contenders for LGBT people’s allegiance than they used to be. It means that the left faces major challenges in becoming a vehicle for queer radicalism. This chapter surveys the landscape of neoliberal same-sex politics.

The rightward trends that gathered momentum around the world from the 1970s increasingly prevailed in LGBT movements in many countries by the dawn of the twenty-first century, and even more so during the post-2001 ‘war on terror’. Alongside the anti-gay, often fundamentalist right, a new gay right has emerged, enthusiastically embracing neoliberalism. The gay, social-liberal centre and centre-left, for their part, have largely made their peace with neoliberalism. The radical left, weakened since the 1980s, has so far failed to present a compelling alternative to gay normality or link up with queer resistance. A queer radicalism has grown up since the 1990s that is challenging gay normality, but various features of it have helped perpetuate its marginality and inhibited the development of an effective queer anti-capitalism.

The overview presented in this chapter may not give reasons for short-term optimism. But it suggests how the dynamics of heteronormativity and homonormativity are played out at different points of the political spectrum.
gives us a clear sense of the tasks and the stakes as we try to craft a queer anti-capitalism that can overcome the limits of existing LGBT political currents.

The Anti-Gay Right

LGBT politics today, like LGBT life in general, has been twisted out of shape by neoliberalism. Politically and ideologically, the neoliberal offensive began with Thatcherism, Reaganism, and the retreat of reformist social democracy and left-liberalism to a pale social-liberalism (heralded by the about-face of the social-democratic Mitterand government in France in 1983). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991 were not the causes of this process; in hindsight, the right’s victory had been won on a global scale by the mid-1980s. But they did put the ideological icing on the cake, making it somewhat more credible to declare the ‘end of history’.

Neoliberal policies, as Lisa Duggan has pointed out, promote the privatisation of the costs of social reproduction through ‘personal responsibility’ exercised in the family and in civil society – thus shifting costs from state agencies to individuals and households. To create a base of political support for such unpopular policies, neoliberal politicians have linked “culture wars” tactics with strategies to shrink public institutions and align their practices with business priorities.1 People with AIDS were ‘accused of irresponsible sexual behavior and left to die without support’.2

Yet the politics of neoliberal austerity comes in different cultural flavours. It has proved compatible with both a cultural conservatism, which defends the family forms it defines as ‘traditional’, and a more broad-minded view that allows some room for same-sex variants. Sexual conservatism was the initial stance of the resurgent right, particularly in the US where mobilisations against abortion and gay rights in the late 1970s provided much of the mass base for reaction under Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Neoconservative intellectual Norman Podhoretz made the link intellectually in 1977 in an essay blaming homosexuality for alleged US appeasement of the Soviet Union.3 It was made on a mass scale beginning in 1977 in Dade County, Florida, where a reactionary campaign succeeded in overturning a lesbian/gay anti-discrimination ordinance, which led to a string of similar defeats in a series of US cities. In response to AIDS, the US right proposed to quarantine HIV-positive people and

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1 Duggan 2003, pp. 14, 34.
2 DeFilippis 2011/2012b.
3 Rubin 2011, pp. 290, 144.