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LGBTIQ

Pinkwashing and Queer Dilemmas

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The sudden eruption of a controversy about whether or not to accept Israeli flags at the Amsterdam Pride Walk on the 20th of July 2024, usually one of the few more political events of the two-week Amsterdam Pride, has thrust the issue of the Israeli genocide in Gaza to the forefront of Dutch LGBTIQ politics. It has also exposed some difficult issues around the attempt to incorporate radical queers into Amsterdam Pride, characterized in the past by rampant commercialization and the presence of police, the military and government ministries.

From 1996 to 2005 the whole of Amsterdam Pride was organized by the Gay Business Association. Even after that it remained mostly a politically tame spectacle for throngs of tourists, with relatively small but militant and creative protests by the radical queer group Reclaim Our Pride. The centre-left Amsterdam city executive tried recently to overcome this polarization by turning the second week of Pride over to the foundation Queer Amsterdam, supposed to represent the city's more radical queers. But Queer Amsterdam's statement that Israeli flags would violate the Pride Walk's anti-racist spirit blew the attempt at inclusion wide open.

The decision of Queer Amsterdam to not welcome Israeli flags in this time of the ongoing genocide on Gaza sparked an array of homonationalist reactions across different stakeholders involved in the organizing of Pride events in Amsterdam. Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema reported that this "ban" would not be allowed, describing it as "imposing censorship on demonstrators". In response, Queer Amsterdam initially issued a statement apologizing, making clear that the Pride Walk would be open to people of all backgrounds who shared the basic values of solidarity. It highlighted the presence of an invited speaker from the Dutch anti-Zionist Jewish group Erev Rav. But this attempt at backpedaling failed to quiet the storm.

In their turn, the Homomonument foundation, which claims to have been organizing Pride since its first edition, issued a statement taking over the organising of the Pride Walk on the 20th, welcoming everyone "regardless of their flag". Queer Amsterdam took a courageous stand in withdrawing from the organizing of the Pride Walk, declaring that they could not accept a compromise that violated its fundamental queer values. It announced that it will hold its own international solidarity protest in the second week of September.

Pride, Respectability politics, and Pinkwashing

According to the Lancet journal, an estimated 186,000 or more deaths among Palestinians can be attributed to the current Israeli genocide on Gaza. The International Court of Justice in the Netherlands found earlier this year in January that it is plausible that Israel is violating the genocide convention. Halsema's stance to consider not welcoming Israeli flags as an act of censorship is absurd to say the least, given this background. Queers have been part of the increasingly strong movement in the Netherlands opposing the genocide. Victories have been won both in mobilizing and on a legal level against Dutch complicity with the genocide. Would Halsema demand tolerance of antisemitic banners at a march against antisemitism? Merely asking the question shows the absurdity of her argument. But clearly sympathy for Zionism is deeply rooted and stubborn, not only in the PVV and on the right but also in the PvdA.

This stance of allowing Israeli flags in the Pride Parade of Amsterdam is an act of pinkwashing the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Pinkwashing is the process which the Israeli state has been using for decades to polish the ongoing settler

colonialism of historic Palestine, picturing Israel as a beacon of gay rights and dismissing the lives of LGBTIQ Palestinians in Occupied Palestine.

Allowing Israeli flags in the Amsterdam Pride Parade is engaging with a system that dismisses queer Palestinian lives both in occupied Palestine and in Europe, and is fueled by the growing racism against people of Middle Eastern origin and people of colour in general. The Amsterdam gay scene has unfortunately long been a fertile ground for pinkwashing ideologies. Queer Amsterdam's courageous stand has now broken a breach in a consensus that has been too solid for too long. In response, BDS Nederland are holding a queer solidarity protest on Saturday 20th of July, to refuse the pinkwashing of the genocide during Pride, under the slogan "No Pride in Genocide".

The creation of Queer Amsterdam as a major actor in Pride offered promise of reaching broad LGBTIQ milieus, going beyond the relatively small numbers mobilized in the past by Reclaim Our Pride's actions against commercialization and homonationalism. But now we must ask whether the opportunity depended too much on funding and supervision by the Dutch state, specifically by the Amsterdam municipality. The resulting foundation structure, which has not been open to broad democratic debates and decision-making, has now weakened Queer Amsterdam in its clash with the municipality.

Setting up foundations for interest groups is an old tradition of Dutch multiculturalism, functioning to contain movements by giving them a limited space for visibility and action. Political movements in contemporary Dutch neoliberal democracy, when organized into foundations, face two significant challenges. Firstly, this results in substitutionalism, resulting in a small number of individuals advocating on behalf of the wider population with limited community engagement in politics. Secondly, these foundations are constrained by the rules established by other, often structurally more powerful, institutions with which they must negotiate.

A recent, particularly problematic example of this was the Feminist March NL, which dissolved on the very day of their planned march due to their inability to manage potential police violence against concurrent anti-genocide protests. Built on the efforts of a few activists and lacking the robust support that collective thinking, discussion, and organization provides, these foundations are inherently vulnerable. In contrast to the outcome of the Feminist March NL, we hope Queer Amsterdam emerges from this experience stronger.

In times of repression of anti-fascist voices within the queer community and the weaponizing of queerness to pinkwash a genocide, it is more essential than ever to draw on the historical anti-fascist symbolism of the Homomonument. The monument, erected in 1987, is composed of three pink triangles, similar to the ones stitched on the jackets of gay victims in concentration camps. Each triangle represents a different aspect of queer memory: one triangle at street level symbolizes the oppression and homophobic violence queer people endured in the past, and contains a verse from a poem by Dutch gay Jewish poet Jacob Israël de Haan: "Naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen" ("Such an Endless Longing for Friendship").

The pink triangle was later adopted during the AIDS pandemic in 1987 as part of the SILENCE = DEATH movement, and ACT UP New York adopted it as a logo symbolizing solidarity and the struggle for life. They, along with Jewish Voice for Peace, recently launched a significant solidarity event with the Palestinian people, calling on Biden to stop arming Israel, with slogans ranging from "No Pride in Genocide" to "From New York to Gaza: Stonewall was an Intifada."

As for De Haan, after moving to Palestine as an ex-socialist religious Zionist, what he saw there turned him within a few years into an anti-Zionist. In 1924 he was assassinated by an armed Zionist band led by a future president of Israel. His memory should remind us: queer solidarity must inspire us to intransigent rejection of discriminatory ideologies, never to acceptance of them in the name of "tolerance" or "unity".

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