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Sexual Politics

Homonationalism and Queer Resistance

- Features - Sexual politics -

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I arrived in the United States prepared to talk about why and how queers need to fight Islamophobia: the fear and hatred of Islam and of Muslims. But [on November 13] the day after my plane landed, Paris was hit by a wave of terrorist attacks. So I can't give quite the same talk that I prepared.

There's no way I can talk about Islamophobia today without talking about events like these, events that fan the flames of Islamophobia. I feel that one of my tasks today is to try to make sense of what seems senseless.

Making sense of these horrors requires understanding that although the hundreds of dead and wounded people in Paris were innocent victims — inappropriate and wrongful targets — it's not true that their country has nothing to do with the dying and suffering today in the Islamic world. Across the Mediterranean from Europe, and especially in Syria, tens of thousands have died and millions have fled over the past five years. And the French government is complicit in this.

For one thing, the French air force, alongside the U.S. air force, has been bombing targets in Syria and killing people, including innocent civilians. France ruled Syria for several decades in the 20th century, after it helped carve up the Ottoman Empire after the First World War. And it fought a brutal colonial war against a Muslim-majority people in Algeria in the 1950s and '60s.

The everyday discrimination that people of Muslim immigrant origin face in France today keeps the historical memory alive of this antagonism between France and the Islamic world — an antagonism whose roots go back even further, to the French national epic *The Song of Roland* with Frankish and Muslim knights in battle, and to the Crusades when Frankish knights ruled much of Palestine and Syria.

If we're going to make sense of senseless acts of terrorism, we have to take all these connections into account: the everyday racism, the history of colonialism, along with the geopolitics and the economics.

Black Lives Matter

At the same time, I don't want to lose sight of the more hopeful and positive connections I came prepared to talk about in the United States. Above all, I want to focus on connections that Black Lives Matter has been making, particularly as it's been spreading in recent weeks across college campuses.

The young queer women of color who launched Black Lives Matter in July 2013 have insisted on bringing the full richness of their identities and oppression to all their analysis and all their politics. I experience this as a political and intellectual challenge for us all — a challenge that inspires me, that I want to help respond to.

I feel that the spirit of solidarity that Black Lives Matter incarnates is the best possible answer to the spirit of division and violence incarnated by both the bombing of Syria and the attacks in Paris. It's in this spirit that I want to try in this talk to link political economy with an analysis of the imperial world order and with a radical politics of sex.

This is something I also try to do in a book of mine that was published this year: *Warped: Gay Normality and Queer*

Anti-Capitalism. The book tries to do a lot of things “more than I can possibly talk about today” but these particular connections are central to my focus today.

So: why would anyone try to link these very different subjects?

Connections

As I wrestled with the question while I was preparing this talk, I realized that answering it puts me in dialogue with a leading figure of queer studies, Gayle Rubin. In a way, the linkages I’m trying to make respond to a call Rubin made in 1975 in her seminal article “The Traffic in Women:” for “a political economy of sex,” “recognizing the mutual interdependence of sexuality, economics, and politics.” But these linkages are also a dissent from the position Rubin staked out a few years later, in 1982, in her equally seminal article “Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality.” [\[1\]](#)

“The Traffic in Women” was deeply rooted in left feminism. But by 1982, Rubin was smarting from the vicious attacks that were being made in the name of feminism on her defense of sexual freedom, especially of lesbian S/M. In “Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality” she set out to free theorizing about sexuality from what she saw as a narrow feminist straitjacket “and at the same time from any kind of Marxist orthodoxy.

Since the connections I’m trying to make today are Marxist connections, I’m particularly concerned today with Rubin’s argument in that 1982 article that Marxism “is most successful in the areas of social life for which it was originally developed “class relations under capitalism.” Alongside and distinct from that Marxism (or feminism), she called for “an autonomous theory and politics specific to sexuality.”

That call can be seen as an early founding moment of queer theory. It had enormously fruitful results for an agenda of research, analysis and queer struggle. But today I think we’re seeing that a new queer generation, the generation of Black Lives Matter, challenges the compartmentalization of economic justice, racial justice, feminism and sexual rebellion that took hold at the end of the 20th century “just as other people in this new queer generation are making connections, unexpected and radical connections, with the fight against Islamophobia.

Let’s try to look at these connections at a theoretical level.

Intersectionality

Theoretically, intersectionality, as conceived by African-American feminists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Collins, is one key tool in overcoming the compartmentalization of oppressions. Intersectionality makes links in theory among class, “race” and gender.

I believe sexuality can and should be fully integrated into the mix, drawing on all the wealth of queer studies since Gayle Rubin’s call in 1982. And I believe an understanding of the global neoliberal economy can and should be fully integrated into the mix.

Unfortunately, as intersectionality found an institutional home in gender studies, it’s gender that has remained central, “race” that has sometimes risked erasure, and class that has largely been the stepchild of the triad “not to mention

other important dimensions like disability, which are even more neglected. I don't think that's inevitable — especially not if intersectionality theory is used as a tool to refine and renew the Marxist-feminist-antiracist synthesis that dates back to the 1970s.

The Marxist-feminist-antiracist synthesis of the 1970s was largely a response, even back then, to Black women who felt that liberal feminists, radical feminists and socialist women were using categories that one-sidedly reflected white female experience. Marxist feminists responded by talking about “double oppression” and “triple oppression.”

Intersectionality theory goes further, with its insight that class, “race” and gender not only overlap but are mutually constitutive, so that they can only be adequately grasped in combination. I think this insight can be integrated into a Marxist-feminist-antiracist framework, and can enrich and deepen that framework.

This can help us understand that class not only has an objective component, but also has cultural and community dimensions. Class is not just about how much money you earn, the work you do, or where you went to school; it's also about where you live, who you hang out with, and what music you listen to. And class is always inherently gendered, sexualized and racialized.

The same thing applies to the analysis of the world order: anti-racist and feminist scholars and activists from W.E.B. DuBois to Cynthia Enloe have shown how deeply and inherently white supremacist and patriarchal the imperialist project is. So in a sense, intersectionality theory can theorize and make explicit connections that thinkers have been making for over a century from within a range of radical paradigms.

Sex and Class

I think a fusion of class analysis and political economy with the study of “race,” gender and sexuality can be especially important for queer people today under neoliberalism. I think this may have something to do with the fact that I came out as a gay man in 1978, the same year I became active as a socialist feminist. But I think it's also relevant to queer generations that have come of age since the 1990s.

For example, fusing political economy with intersectionality theory can help us understand, on the one hand, why even radical queers today with pretty low incomes — like lots of other people whom I as a Marxist would consider working-class — often do not identify as working-class. On the other hand, intersectional analysis makes clear how the interpenetrating fundamentals of class, “race” and gender nonetheless do shape queer lives.

I think young queers in particular often fail to identify as working-class today because the working-class identity forged by earlier generations — the generations of the 1950s and '60s, the Fordist generations [the high point of well-paid industrial production — ed.] — often doesn't fit the reality of their lives.

But that's an expression of the reality of the working class under neoliberal capitalism — a working class that is divided, fragmented and polarized, economically, nationally, ethnically and racially. That reality is why so many queers today don't have secure jobs, and have low levels of unionization (even if they're academics).

Most queers are in fact excluded from the gay professional and managerial layer that's provided the dominant media imagery of LGBTIQ people lately, and that's dominated U.S. lesbian/gay politics — certainly since the Human Rights Campaign established its ascendancy around the turn of the century.

Contrary to the portrayal of lesbians and gay men in glossy gay magazines as affluent consumers buying up vodka, designer clothes and cruises, recent studies show that gay men in the United States have lower incomes on average than straight men; and while lesbians have higher incomes on average than straight women, their incomes are still lower on average than men's — not to mention trans and intersex people, whose incomes are way at the bottom of the charts.

So there's a growing sense of alienation among many queers from the lesbian/gay upper crust that is held up to them as a model. Yet oddly enough, the widespread alienation from this upper crust also distances many queers from working-class identity — or at least from a certain narrow conception of it, the conception that trade union leaders propagate when they describe their own base as "middle class."

And none of this can be understood apart from its racial, national, gender and — of course — sexual dimensions.

Homonormativity

For most young queers today, still, the image of a "worker" is white, male and straight. You can't understand the realities of class without an intersectional approach — an intersectional approach fused with some of the key insights of contemporary radical queer theory.

This brings me to the key concept of "homonormativity," which Lisa Duggan described over a decade ago as a gay mindset that does not "contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them." [2] I'm indebted to her for the connection she made between the imposition of a lesbian/gay norm, within the overarching framework of heteronormativity — the framework in which straight people are assumed to be the norm, and the rest of us at best a tolerated minority — and the neoliberal society we've been living in for the last 35 years.

Duggan has shown that the imposition of a gay norm, within the overarching framework of a heteronormative society, has a class dimension. Gay normality reflects the ways that middle-class gays, and a certain layer of more established and prosperous working-class gays and to a lesser extent lesbians, need to adapt in order to occupy a secure niche within the neoliberal order.

At the same time, homonormativity has a central gender dimension. That's because neoliberal capitalism, like capitalism in general, is gendered. It's a mode of social production and reproduction, with care and family formation being key to getting people to work in the morning and keeping production going.

Under neoliberalism, as Holly Lewis has pointed out, capital is able to some extent to draw on surplus populations — immigrants to rich countries, or people in poor countries to whom some tasks can be outsourced — to keep the costs of social reproduction down. But there are limits to this. So at the same time, even in rich countries, neoliberalism leads to the privatization of care as a result of one round after another of cuts to social services. This allows for lower corporate taxes, while profits are boosted and wealth concentrated more and more in the hands of the one percent.

In this context, some lesbians and gays are being integrated into the existing capitalist family institution through same-sex marriage and adoption — demands that we should support, but critically and with a transitional approach. This integration into the family requires a degree of gender conformity from normalized lesbians and gays. And since the 1990s this has increasingly separated them from trans people and gender queers, who in the previous century since the invention of homosexuality had not been clearly demarcated in a separate category from other

“homosexual persons.”

Homonormativity also has a crucial racial dimension, in the context of the growing racialization of all class and social relations. In a time of crisis, in which millions of people are ejected from the formal economy into unemployment or incarceration, normalized lesbians and gays largely identify (if they can) as white.

Further, at a time when whole regions are being ejected from the global neoliberal economy, normalized LGBT people are increasingly being integrated into the dominant nation-states. This is the material basis of what Jasbir Puar calls “homonationalism”: the instrumentalization of lesbian/gay rights in the service of imperialist and Islamophobic ideologies. [3]

Islamophobia

I think Puar’s concept of homonationalism enables us to add a sexual dimension to our analysis of the neoliberal world order, updating it to reflect the realities of the 21st century. Homonationalism fosters the belief that a country like the United States is a beacon of LGBT rights, and that U.S. invasions and interventions in regions like the Middle East are somehow advancing LGBT rights. This means that U.S. lesbians and gays should be good patriots.

In reality the United States supports horrifically homophobic regimes in the Middle East, like the Saudi kingdom and Iraq. But homonationalism is still popular, and helps expand public support for U.S. militarism.

Whose interests does U.S. militarism really serve? The Argentinean Marxist economist Claudio Katz has analyzed post-Cold War militarism as the armed component of neoliberal globalization, the global economic order we’ve had for the last 35 years. Middle Eastern oil and the sea routes that pass through the Middle East are vital to the neoliberal world economic order. So the military and political struggle for dominance in that part of the world is key to today’s geopolitical order.

That was true when George H.W. Bush achieved the return of a direct U.S. military presence to the Middle East by stationing U.S. troops in the Saudi kingdom in 1990. It was true when George W. Bush invaded Iraq in 2003. And it has remained true since 2011, as Barack Obama has struggled to maintain and reassert U.S. power in the Arab region in the face of the Arab uprisings. And throughout, this has underpinned the United States’ support for Israel, as one of very few reliable U.S. junior partners in a part of the world where U.S. power is under continual threat.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, U.S. and other imperialisms were defending their economic power in the Middle East largely from movements that claimed socialist inspiration, whether they claimed to be Marxist, or more often “Arab socialist” (like Egypt’s Nasser). Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, however, forces challenging imperial dominance in the region have largely claimed Islamic inspiration.

This is the material reality behind Islamophobia, the ideology that demonizes Muslim people and countries, explicitly or subtly. Today Islamophobia has replaced anti-Communism as the main ideology of the U.S. empire.

I think an intersectional approach — an intersectional approach informed by political economy and by some of the key insights of contemporary queer theory — allows us to understand homonationalism as a distinctly lesbian/gay variant of this basic imperial ideology. As part of an intersectional analysis, homonationalism can be understood as a fourth dimension of homonormativity, an imperial dimension, alongside its class dimension, its gender dimension and its racial dimension.

Like racialized homonormativity, homonationalism rests on a material basis: the marginalization of millions of people, in the United States and worldwide, who have become disposable human beings from the point of view of capital. This is the reality that millions of unemployed and incarcerated people, particularly people of color, face in the United States, and that millions of refugees, largely from Muslim-majority countries, face in the Middle East and now increasingly in Europe.

The Meaning of Queer

Now, just as there is a material basis to Islamophobia and homonationalism, there is a material basis to queer opposition to Islamophobia and homonationalism. But let me define what I mean by “queer.”

“Queer” is still often used today as a rough, irreverent term for LGBTIQ in general. But it also has a more specific connotation. Culturally, socially and politically, I think “queer” can usefully be defined *as* and is often defined, consciously or unconsciously, by self-identified queers, in opposition to homonormativity.

If we do that, we can start analyzing queer in terms of political economy *as* without being reductive, without positing any one-to-one correspondence between sexual self-identification and position in society. There is no such correspondence. But it can be useful, in fact vitally important, to see that there are correlations.

There are correlations between LGBTI people who identify as queer and particular societal positions *as* positions that make queers less likely to have middle-class lifestyles or the resources to support them. There are correlations between queer self-identification and forms of gender dissidence: the unwillingness or inability for men to be conventionally masculine or for women to be conventionally feminine.

And although queer self-identification hasn't necessarily appealed broadly to LGBTI people of color *as* people from Barbara Smith to Cathy Cohen have analyzed and mourned the opportunities that white queer activists have missed here *as* I think that young queer women of color's leadership of Black Lives Matter has shown a real affinity between sexual and racial rebellion. And self-identified queers have been particularly visible in opposition to forms of homonationalism, such as Islamophobia and pinkwashing of Israel.

So we can fit different forms of queer resistance into a broader picture. Queer rejection of a commercialized ghetto, trans people's and gender queers' rebellion against the gender binary, queer women of color's leadership of Black Lives Matter, queer critiques of Islamophobia and pinkwashing *as* these all show the potential for rebuilding what Alan Sears (author of *The Next New Left*) has defined as an “infrastructure of dissent.”

They show that queers have a role to play in resisting an unequal and unjust global order. In this way, we can help lay the foundations for a queer, anti-capitalist rainbow politics. And ultimately, we can take part in a reconfigured project of global societal transformation.

Republished from [Against the Current](#).

[1] Both these articles are now collected in Gayle Rubin, *Deviations* (Duke University Press, 2011).

Homonationalism and Queer Resistance

[2] Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity," in Russ Castronovo and Dana Nelson eds., *Materializing Democracy* (Duke University Press, 2002), 179

[3] *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Duke University Press, 2007), xxiv, 38-9.