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LGBTIQ

The far right, LGBTIQ people and a strategy for resistance

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The far right is on the rise in one country after another. It has unmistakably become a central factor in contemporary European and world politics. I have come to think that in the coming years the fight against the far right will be decisive for the radical and revolutionary left. So it is more and more urgent for us to understand the far-right threat we face. To some extent we can learn from Marxist analyses of classical fascism, particularly in Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. But many things have changed on the far right. To use the term of our comrade Enzo Traverso, most of the far right today is ‘post-fascist’: sometimes in continuity with the old fascist right, sometimes not. And gender and sexual politics are not a side issue for the far right – they are key. So this is one of the things we urgently need to understand. [1]

The far right and heteronationalism

As the far right has risen, examples of its attacks on LGBTI rights have multiplied. Brazil's new far-right president Jair Bolsonaro is a prominent and disgusting example. He has openly said that he would prefer a dead son to a gay one. Not surprisingly, his election has produced a surge of anti-LGBTIQ violence in Brazil, which was already one of the countries with the highest levels of anti-LGBTIQ violence. Although Donald Trump's positions were less clear before his election as US president, he too has catered since then to the reactionary anti-LGBTIQ right. His administration has intervened in the courts to oppose measures against discrimination, and has tried to purge trans people from the military.

There are similar examples in Europe. The Italian Lega was the most relentless opponent in parliament of same-sex civil unions – not to mention same-sex marriage! – submitting over 5,000 amendments in an attempt to kill the bill. And here in the Spanish state, the far-right party Vox has on its website denounced Pride events as ‘scandalous’.

Some people call these right-wing anti-LGBTIQ attacks ‘political homophobia’. This may not be the best term. Although the people who use it don't necessarily mean it this way, it sounds like a kind of mental illness. I think it makes more sense to talk about ‘heteronationalism’. This is one dimension of broader right-wing nationalist projects with deep roots in society.

What is the source of anti-LGBTIQ prejudice on the nationalist right? Why is the far right attacking LGBTIQ people? One key reason is its deep hostility to women, its misogyny, which is linked to its contradictory relation to neoliberalism. The combination of misogyny and economic populism helps the far right appeal to angry straight men. Deindustrialization and stagnant wages in many economies, most recently following the deep recession that broke out in 2008, has undermined many men's sense of masculinity. Many cisgender straight men blame this on women and LGBTIQ people.

Scholars like George Mosse, himself a gay man whose family fled from Nazi Germany, have shown how closely aggressive nationalism is linked to a narrow concept of masculinity. This concept 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. This was one reason why the Nazis in Germany were fiercely hostile to homosexuality, at least among Germans: they thought that it weakened the ‘Aryan master race’. The far right around the world today still has a similar concept of masculinity. In Catholic countries especially, it has taken up the pope's attack on ‘gender ideology’ and his defence of the traditional bounds of masculine and feminine roles.

This misogynist and sexually reactionary far right has been on the rise in many countries where LGBTIQ movements have been winning victories. These LGBTIQ movements emerged and grew stronger especially after 1968, when they had radical left leaderships that saw them as part of a broader radical left. Their militant visions and tactics helped win the first victories in the 1970s and 1980s against discrimination and violence. Later, as LGBTIQ movements grew larger and the broader radical left grew weaker, mainstream LGBTI groups became more moderate. They put less emphasis on solidarity against sexism, racism and class oppression, and focused more narrowly on issues like marriage equality. But this has not made the far right love them. The far right in most countries still opposes same-sex marriage, often fiercely.

Mainstream LGBTI groups have however built ties to the social-liberal centre-left and even the neoliberal centre-right. Some of the most anti-LGBTIQ far-right positions need to be understood, at least in part, as reactions to official support for LGBTI rights, which predominates now in the political centre in Western Europe and some other imperialist countries. This is not a factor everywhere. Trump's attacks on LGBTIQ people are not especially inspired by hostility to Europe, although he is often anti-European, and anti-LGBTIQ attacks in Brazil don't particularly reflect an anti-European discourse either. But many neoliberal, authoritarian African and Arab regimes do claim – despite a lot of historical evidence to the contrary – to be defending ‘their own’ cultures against European LGBTIQ influence. And something similar is going on with the Eastern European far right.

In Western Europe, reforms like decriminalization, anti-discrimination laws and marriage equality were national reforms rooted in national politics. Some Eastern European reforms had national dynamics too; East Germany for example decriminalized same-sex sex a year before West Germany did. But more recent Eastern European reforms have mostly resulted from European Union policies. LGBTI Eastern Europeans have benefited from legal gains as a result. But many Eastern Europeans now see protections for LGBTI people as something imposed from outside.

And at the same time that the EU has been promoting LGBTI rights, it has been an instrument of neoliberalism in Eastern Europe. This has meant a growing presence of Western European capital, cuts in social protections and increases in inequality. Neoliberal policies have been justified with a liberal ideology of freedom, including LGBTI rights. 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 countries like Poland and Hungary, the right in power is playing on resentment of neoliberal ideology, while maintaining many key features of neoliberal economics.

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’. 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.

The far right and homonationalism

Now I need to make the discussion more complex, by talking about the less homophobic side of the far right. This means talking about homonationalism, a term coined by the US scholar Jasbir Puar. It means the instrumentalization of LGBTI rights in the service of imperialism and nationalism.

Although the far right is usually anti-LGBTIQ, I think far-right homonationalism is also a serious problem. For one thing, the contemporary European far right is sometimes inconsistent on issues of gender and sexuality. If we take the Nazi hostility to homosexuality 80 years ago as the baseline, today's far right is not always in continuity with earlier fascist traditions.

And 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, and they have both been growing. Mainstream LGBTI leaders may not support the far right, but their failure to fight neoliberalism and racism has left many ordinary LGBTI people open to the far right's appeal. 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 open homophobe Bolsonaro. And polls have shown comparable levels of support, particularly among white cisgender gay men, for Le Pen in France and the far right in the Netherlands.

The European far right's hostility to Muslims sometimes seems to outweigh their hostility to LGBTI people. 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). The Marxist feminist Sara Farris has shown how the French, Italian and Dutch far right have adopted a kind of 'femonationalism' that claims to defend European women, even women of immigrant origin, against Muslim men and other men of non-European origin. 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 has described how a Muslim threat has been used to justify a right-wing turnaround on LGBTI issues. In 1998, Dutch right-wing columnist Gerry van der List expressed disgust at what he saw as gay men's sexual exhibitionism at the Amsterdam Gay Games. Yet a few years later the same Van der List was enthusiastic about gay men's exuberant behaviour at Amsterdam's Canal Pride. This time he thought they were heroically resisting Islam. 'They're still the same naked blokes,' Heijne summed up, 'but now they stand for something different.'

There have been some similar changes in the public standpoints of several north-west European far-right parties. Flemish far-right leader Flip Dewinter voted against same-sex marriage in the Belgian parliament in 2003, but in 2014 he declared that his party was now in favour. Breaking from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen, 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.' In the Netherlands, Martin Bosma, an MP for the far-right Freedom Party, said 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!'

This kind of far-right homonationalism is not just an opportunist way of getting LGBTI votes. It fits into a broader discourse in 'defence of the family'. Homonationalism needs to be more broadly understood as one dimension of 'homonormativity', which Lisa Duggan has described as a gay mindset that does not 'contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them'. Homonormativity helps some lesbian/gay people integrate into existing family institutions, adapting in order to occupy a more secure niche within the neoliberal order. To some extent, some far-right parties have been adopting a homonormative outlook. And at least a minority of gay voters like it.

In some cases lesbian and gay people can even be found at the summit of far-right parties. In Germany, the chair of the far-right Alternative for Germany's parliamentary party, Alice Weidel, is an open lesbian. The former national secretary of the French National Front, Florian Philippot, is an open gay man. Despite Donald Trump's attacks on LGBTIQ people, he has gay defenders among the so-called Log Cabin Republicans. He has appointed an openly gay ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell, who has been publicly supporting far-right parties around Europe. Stranger yet, even in the administration of an open bigot like Bolsonaro in Brazil, his Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights includes openly lesbian and trans high officials, who represent Brazil in international human rights meetings.

A word of caution here, though: even the most homonationalist far-right parties find that supporting LGBTI rights puts them in tension with their own base. An official Dutch study concluded that despite the far-right Freedom Party's public pro-gay statements, its voters had more anti-LGBTIQ attitudes than those of any other major party. And far-right parties that move too far away from their base can lose votes, as we've seen recently with the Dutch Freedom Party and the Danish People's Party. This helps explain how cautious 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; but in the end they voted against.

The French National Rally (formerly the National Front) has perhaps wrestled the most with this contradiction. As I mentioned earlier, Marine Le Pen was starting to appeal for gay votes a decade ago. Then in 2012, when the SP government's project for same-sex marriage faced 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. Le Pen herself mostly kept quiet on marriage, leaving the dirty work to her niece Marion Maréchal Le Pen. In its programme for the 2017 elections the party tried to reconcile its gay and anti-gay supporters by pledging to convert existing same-sex marriages into strong civil unions.

Beneath all these contradictions, though, there is an underlying unity of purpose. There's an analogy here. In the last analysis, the far right defends the capitalist order, even if it sometimes adopts populist social policies. Similarly, in the last analysis it defends patriarchal families and gender roles, even if it sometimes shows some tolerance for some LGBTI people and relationships.

And yet, some lesbian and gay people are still attracted to the far right's vision. This suggests that LGBTIQ communities, like the far right, are cut across by contradictions.

Strategies and perspectives for international LGBTIQ resistance

So with all these tensions and contradictions, how can the radical and revolutionary left help mobilise LGBTIQ people against the far right? The key is solidarity, joined with flexible and creative united front tactics. We need to be prepared to unite in action with any LGBTIQ groups and people that are willing to mobilize against the far right. This means particularly standing up for and building alliances with Muslims and other racialized groups threatened by the far right, showing how racism and heteronationalism are linked. When the far right claims to protect LGBTI people against Muslims and Africans, LGBTIQ people need to respond, loud and clear: Not in our name!

At the same time, we mustn't keep quiet about the responsibility that mainstream LGBTI groups bear for losing part of their base to reactionary populism. We need to call for a return to the spirit of 1968. This year, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion, all the official Pride celebrations are claiming the legacy of Stonewall, while understanding little or nothing of the radical left politics that informed the rebellion and the Gay Liberation Fronts that emerged from it. In some cases far-right contingents have been able to march behind banners with slogans about Stonewall – which is an absolute travesty. We need to reclaim Stonewall's true, full legacy. This means not talking about tolerance, not even about just acceptance, but about sexual liberation. And sexual liberation requires challenging gender roles, requires transforming the family instead of just integrating into it, and requires transforming society as a whole.

Above all we need to mobilize LGBTIQ working people, homeless queer youth, women, racialized and oppressed people – who are after all the too-invisible majority of LGBTIQ communities – against both the far right and neoliberalism. We need to make clear that the anti-poor policies of our governments are inherently homo-, trans- and

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bi-phobic. By mobilizing the working-class and oppressed majority of our communities, we can reach masses of LGBTIQ people who have suffered from and been embittered by neoliberal policies – and in some cases, unfortunately, have turned to the reactionary right to express their anger. Building broad progressive alliances that include open LGBTIQ people against neoliberalism and reaction can be an effective way of combating anti-LGBTIQ prejudices. And where some gay people and lesbians have an abiding commitment to the far right, out of racism or perceived class interest, mobilizing the LGBTIQ majority around a vision of solidarity can make it possible to throw the far right out of our movement and keep it out.

We need to send this message at Pride events in particular, using whatever tactics work best in a specific situation: building broad anti-racist blocs, or organizing radical queer contingents, or if there is too little space for that, alternative Pride events. This will require a lot of creativity and discussion, trial and error. So let's begin the discussion here!

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[1] This paper was given as an educational at the Fourth International youth camp, 25 July 2019. Thanks to the participants in the discussion, whose contributions particularly strengthened the section on resistance.