

Homonormative dynamics and the subversion of culture

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Abstract

Queer critics speak more and more of a normalization process whereby early lesbian and gay struggles against traditional values and institutions are being replaced by the pursuit of inclusion within mainstream society. The “assimilation” of same-sex practices, critics contend, lowers the critical potential of homosexuals’ claims and marginalizes other less acceptable forms of sexualities. The present article contributes to this literature by tracing the roots and dynamics of normalization. I make the claim that heteronormative categories penetrated homosexual culture well before the spread of neoconservative gay movements and produced inner distinctions intended to exclude those who did not fit intergroup classifications. I then maintain that this analysis casts some interesting light on the current quest for gay rights, and in particular for same-sex marriage. By doing so, this article aims to tackle the broader question of how to produce societal changes able to circumvent rear-guard reactions from the dominant culture.

Keywords

homonormativity, intimacy, normalization, resignification, same-sex marriage

[A] seemingly hegemonic form contains the history of its own undoing by other possibilities that the law refuses to realize (Freeman 2007: 497)

In an era of growing tolerance toward homosexual sexuality, the ways in which homophobic attitudes express themselves are remarkably changing. As many critics and theorists suggest, such a discourse is so subtly couched that it may turn out to be more dangerous than openly reactionary views. In particular, juridico-political devices such as equality and integration appear to produce assimilationist outcomes that, whether directly or indirectly, alter both the range and composition of oppressed groups. Ironically, the production of new anomalous, marginalized sexualities is attained by means of the rights discourse, by which states recognize as equal, and are inclined to integrate, what they themselves determine as qualified members of the body politic. As the story goes, Western liberal societies seem more and more willing to grant equal rights and equal opportunities to homosexuals who distance themselves from the subversive model of promiscuous, flaunting, militant queer, and take on the character of the “good homosexual” (see e.g. Smith 1994; Johnson 2002).

Analyses that seek to chart the dynamics of this normalization process are mushrooming (Warner 1999; Richardson 2000; Seidman 2002; Richardson 2005), whereas scholars put forward new labels either in order to portray at best this changing scenario, as in the case of “homonormativity” (Duggan 2003), or in order to identify the strategic, political uses to which this process seems amenable, as in the case of “homonationalism” (Puar 2006).

These studies foreground how the inclusion of homosexual sexualities is taking the shape of a “conditional acceptance”: at the very moment that homosexuals acquire the

status of full citizens, and thus are empowered to make use of the whole set of legal tools that citizenship offers them, they are prompted to frame their concerns and needs with the “homolingual” jargon of rights. This engenders a performative transformation of the frame within which homosexual issues are formulated and ratifies the adhesion to the tacit anthropology that underpins the ideal of the “good citizen”.

Critics and sceptics do not contend that the accommodation of non-heterosexual sexualities within “respectable” sexual practices has produced no effects on straight culture and traditional understandings of kinship. Indeed, while family arrangements and household forms undermine the nuclear, biology-based family’s claim to be the social unit *par excellence*, society is more and more believed to be built on responsible and free choice rather than on blood ties. Further, the boundaries of the traditional model of family are far less firm, as a growing number of people are cohabiting and choose not to marry, while parenting takes on a variety of forms (single-parenting, joint custody, parallel parenting, and so on).

Despite this, critics and sceptics claim that these changes need careful scrutiny. If, at face value, such societal developments convey the idea that heterosexual and heterosexist prejudices have been severely destabilized to the advantage of previously excluded sexual minorities, what has to be thoroughly inspected is the manners in which these transformations have occurred. In-depth studies of these dynamics show that the revision of hegemonic forms of sex, family, parenting and kinship is taking place in such a way that the core elements of these forms may not be dislodged. The result is that, critics go on to say, as straights have changed, so have homosexuals. However, they insist, the impact of traditional heterosexual values on homosexual values is much more effective than the impact of the latter on the former. In short, lesbians and gays underwent a

readjustment of their own desires and interests that made them compatible with a set of traditional values and institutions, which erstwhile homosexual movements deemed to be the chief cause of their oppression.

In this article I will examine what brought about the process illustrated so far. I will eventually claim that the readjustment of lesbian and gay peoples' desires and interests was actually instrumental in the reworking of the mobile boundaries of normality, one that could preserve the pre-eminence of a set of elements (such as coupledness and intimacy) within the definition of "respectable" relationships. To put it bluntly, what may be read as a compromise between homosexual and heterosexual culture was meant to reinforce the link among the sacredness of coupledness, the role of intimacy and the right to form unions. At the same time, however, I will seek to reinforce and expand available analyses of normalization. I will claim that most studies fail to capture its primary sources, which were at work well before the emergence of neoconservative movements.

To achieve this aim, in the first section I will define the theoretical framework against which my argument will be constructed. I will concentrate on the potentials of what many queer and sexuality scholars have long regarded as a stepping stone to the transformation of society, that is, the resignification of traditional institutions by way of defiant and subversive use of the latter's own language. In the second section, I will seek to determine what the effects have been of this subversive enterprise. By analysing the impressive turn which occurred in the field of homosexual struggles, I will advance the hypothesis that such forms of cultural subversion fell short to such an extent that previous radicalism has been almost entirely replaced by more sedate reformism. In the third section I will challenge the contention that this metamorphosis has primarily to do with recent changes in the attitude and composition of homosexual movements. I will argue

that heterosexual and heterosexist categories had already penetrated earlier homosexual culture and produced inner distinctions intended to exclude those who did not fit the new classification. In the fourth section I will depict the quest for gay rights, and in particular, the recognition of same-sex marriage, not as an unpredictable shift, but rather as a foreordained slippery slope. I will conclude by arguing that the struggle against the oppression of homosexuals should not take the shape of confined efforts to bring in more equality in the field of interpersonal relationships. Rather, homosexual struggles should join up with other struggles, not necessarily confined to the sphere of sexuality, in a shared effort to resist the mechanisms that turn every defiance into further, perhaps inadvertent acceptance.

Defiance and misuse of existing categories

In the last decades, scholars focusing on the dynamics of family and kinship have been dwelling on a thorny dilemma: can social institutions, such as marriage and family, laden with a specific history and implanted in a specific tradition, acquire a different meaning and exert transformative effects on that very history and that very tradition? Can such a politics of *resignification* – conceived as the capacity to use language “oppositionally” in order to defy hegemonic terms and confer on them counter-hegemonic meanings (Lloyd 2007) – trigger a wider process of inner revision able to disassemble and reassemble such institutions to the extent that they are not the same as before? Or, rather, is there the risk that such a disassembling and reassembling may prove just an optical illusion, whereby institutions seem to change while in reality everything stays the same or, worse, their

original structure is reinforced? Let me explore this dilemma by juxtaposing two views of the matter.

While questioning the relative autonomy of speech acts from the context that makes them achieve their performative effect, Pierre Bourdieu insists that the success or felicity of performative utterances – whose first elaboration dates back to John L. Austin’s works – rests on antecedent classifications and a previous distribution of symbolic power. One’s order is obeyed or one can make someone minister because the one who issues the order and confers the charge is *previously* authorized. What Bourdieu calls the “magic” of performative speech acts is the process of concealment that makes language appear to have power of its own. According to him, this misconception is even bolstered by linguists and philosophers of language who believe that discourse itself is key to the efficacy of speech acts. They, Bourdieu (1991: 111) avers, stubbornly strive to discover the power of a performative utterance within language, and straightforwardly ignore that it ‘is destined to fail each time that it is not pronounced by a person who has the “power” to pronounce it’. The magic dissolves as soon as one looks at the social field that structures people’s relation to each other and distributes power in such a way that this distribution may be reflected in the force and success of speakers’ linguistic productions.

Bourdieu’s primary concern is with the dynamics that the relation between speech acts and the field where they take place betrays. The gist of his argument is that the actions of agents within the social realm and their different effects are to be traced to the position they occupy and the stock of symbolic power they are endowed with. In this portrayal, no autonomy is allowed to the distinct constituents that comprise a context, since the former’s meaning and position structurally hinge on the latter. This is all the more important if these constituents are not merely orders, requests, promises and the like, but

concern the organization of the social realm in accordance with a sexist, heterosexist and androcentric matrix. Bourdieu (2001: 9) deploys this view when he explains how ‘social order functions as an immense symbolic machine tending to ratify the masculine domination on which it is founded’.

In this scenario the same mechanism is at work: within the social space a given speech act or arbitrary (sexist and heterosexist) classification succeeds because those who are addressed or classified adhere to, and thus sanctify, the structure within which the speech act and the classification produce effects. ‘[T]he dominated apply to what dominates them schemes that are the product of domination’ to such an extent that ‘their acts of *cognition* are, inevitably, acts of *recognition*, submission’ (2001: 13). These effects culminate in what Bourdieu depicts as a profound and durable transformation of both bodies and perceptive categories, on which a practical construction of a *differentiated definition* of the legitimate uses of the body is foisted upon. These durable effects are so pervasive that they exclude ‘from the universe of the feasible and thinkable everything that marks membership of the other gender’ (2001: 23).

This is a conclusion that Judith Butler struggled hard to disprove. In particular, she detects two main flaws: first, the ambiguity, or even the circularity affecting Bourdieu’s view of the source of the power retained by those who hold power; second, the capacity of the distinct elements of a given structure to escape the forcible confinement to a delimited space within that structure and to produce disruptive transformations.

In levelling a criticism that has by now become a topos (see e.g. Swartz 1997: pp. 211-214; Lane 2006: Chap. 5), Butler (1997; 1999) laments the fixity and rigidity of Bourdieu’s map of power, whereby agents are relegated to the power position they are assigned by their habitus and endlessly reproduce the structure. As I said before, this

criticism is twofold, for Butler looks both at the origin and the firmness of power positions in order to shed light on non-authorized speech acts able to challenge the authority.

Butler (1999: 122) claims that Bourdieu ‘fails to take account of the way in which social positions are themselves constructed through a more tacit operation of performativity’. In this light, Bourdieu is charged with taking a given structure for granted and omitting to unearth the way it entered into force. The original act of authorization, which ‘is not always initiated by a subject or by a representative of a state apparatus’ (1999: 122), is left unquestioned. Building on this view, Butler goes on by saying that the *expropriation* of the dominant discourse could lead to a resignification of the meanings involved in it and to a subversion of the initial instantiation of power and entitlement. She advocates an ‘improper use of performative [...] producing the effect of authority where there is no recourse to a prior authorization’. A genuine *misappropriation* leading to a “reinscription” (Butler 1997: 145), whereby terms – improperly used or properly misused – come to take on a novel meaning and to spark off an inner transformation of the context where they had been confined by the dominant discourse.

Now, let me concentrate on another diatribe, which seems to go down the same path.

At the same time the Bourdieu-Butler exchange was making its rounds, pre-eminent cultural anthropologist David Schneider (1997) produced an article casting doubts on Corinne Hayden’s (1995) contention that homosexuals’ strategic and transformative use of heterosexual symbols is conducive to a process of resignification. It is important to recall that Schneider was the one who put forward the seminal thesis that kinship is a purely social construct. His critique of the misuse and overextension of such a construct by anthropologists and ethnologists was so effective that, according to some scholars, it

contributed to drawing the study of kinship to a close (Feinberg and Ottenheimer 2001). It is no accident that many feminists and queer anthropologists took his study as a point of departure to rethink both kinship studies as a whole and the role that relatedness plays in contemporary societies (Freeman 2007a). In effect, this is also Hayden's viewpoint, who, in her article on lesbian families, builds on Schneider's conclusion that kinship always involves a necessary element of choice and, at the same time, brings into question his idea that kinship is nothing other than a folk theory of biological reproduction, precisely because the biological element can be subverted and resignified.

Hayden makes the claim that lesbian families, *qua* "chosen" families, exert disruptive effects on the traditional understanding of kinship, for they erode the taken-for-granted binary *blood and love* as the constituents of legitimate kin ties. On the one hand, she draws on Kath Weston's (1991) investigation of gay and lesbian families, which challenges the model of kinship based upon procreation and biological ties, and, in doing so, paves the way for an alternative comprehension. "Chosen" familial relationships are not procreative and yet are forms of kinship. These families are rooted in choice and love, not biological ties, and thus need to be distinguished from the dominant model of relatedness. If such families are neither imitative nor derivative of the dominant model, they must be recognized as giving life to a genuine alternative. On the other hand, however, Hayden pushes this conclusion further, for she argues that the "elective" element can be, and often is, combined with a simultaneous revision of the biological one. In this way, both the meaning and the context of biological ties get radically transformed.

New technologies – such as, for example, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilization, zygote intrafallopian transfer and surrogacy (see Carsten 2004; Robertson 2005) – allow a renegotiation of the "naturalness" of motherhood as they make room for

a tripartite model comprised of genetic, birth, and social mother. In this altered framework, 'one woman could contribute the genetic material, and her partner could become the gestational/birth mother' (Hayden 1995: 55). If this is true, then it is not only a matter of choice. Lesbian kinship also permits attributing new meanings and giving alternative shapes to both biological bonds and the familial structures constructed upon them. The alliance between homosexual sexualities and procreative technologies, according to Hayden, opens up to multiple manipulations of the contingency of kinship symbols and the related construction of gender, generation and sexuality.

The moot point of the two confrontations proves the same: can socially available categories and institutions be challenged and revised by the very subjects who are excluded by a social categorization that tends to exclude those who do not fit heterosexist classifications? Schneider (1997) applauds the emancipatory and legitimizing value of homosexuals' forming couples. It is neither parody nor mimicry; neither masked assimilation nor forthright adhesion to an alien model. It is just a way to emphasize difference and at once to claim it must be recognized as such. However in his view, the most compelling question is: Why do homosexuals follow the patterns of heterosexual couples? Why do they fall in love, which they expect to be lasting, want to celebrate marriages or marriage-like ceremonies, and want to form couples and domestic units? Schneider does not see any transformative and resignifying element involved in such tendencies, whether or not homosexuals achieve their goals through new technologies: '[G]ays and lesbians will use the term *cousin* for the children of their mothers' and fathers' brothers, and the terms *nephew* and *niece* for their siblings' children' (1997: 272).

Homosexual couples' is a legitimate demand for access to a model that, in Schneider's view, serves as a category of classification embedded in our culture. Any

change that may occur will occur in the direction set by the model, because culture, *qua* hegemonic discourse, ‘envelops the individual and imposes its forms’, and when people for ‘whatever reason, often without reason, [...] just do not buy into’ this discourse, ‘they do not just go off on a toot in any which direction. They go off on a toot that is always (!) oriented toward or away from the hegemonic cultural discourse, very often in an opposite direction. But hardly anybody toots off by founding a society for sex with Canada geese. If “heterosexual” is the cultural requirement, “homosexual” is its opposite and the way to go’ (1997: 273).

Bourdieu is less convinced that culture is immutable. He envisages some leeway for what he sees as the neutralization of a process of “*dehistoricization* and *externalization*” of the structures that determine the sexist and heterosexist organization of society. If such an arbitrary and historical classification has been transmuted into nature, he insists, a cognitive enterprise is required that may unmask its transient character. At the same time, however, he offers a penetrating insight into the way cognition and action have to hold together. No cognitive undertaking is likely to succeed unless it prompts ‘a radical transformation of the social conditions of production of the dispositions that lead the dominated to take the point of view of the dominant on the dominant and on themselves’ (Bourdieu 2001: 42). On this account, combating historical forces of dehistoricization requires a political mobilization, which cannot merely rely on non-authorized speech acts challenging the authorized ones. Far-reaching collective actions of resistance, aimed at legal and political reforms, have to counter and attack the principles that govern both the “sexual division of labour” and the “division of sexual labour”.

In substance, either replies aim to stress the too facile assumption that resignification can take place within the structure where terms are assigned a meaning. Schneider claims that any misuse or transformative appropriation always takes the direction that the dominant discourse “expects” them to take. If he does not deny that homosexuals’ aspiration to form domestic units may be conducive to a fairer regulation of relationships that makes room for difference, hardly can this type of struggle result in a far-reaching transformation of kinship structures. Rather, it could be regarded as a confirmation of what kinship culture makes available and makes *desirable* to those who cannot benefit from the regulation at stake. Bourdieu contends that acts of cognitive subversion are likely to succeed only if they form part of a broader conjunction between neutralizing theorization and active juridico-political struggles: only that way can the arbitrary naturalness of sexual dispositions be unmasked as the product of a history entrapping the body and the mind of social subjects.

What lesson can we learn from these exchanges? In the subsequent sections I will claim that the so-called process of normalization that many queer and sexuality scholars have convincingly charted and denounced is due to a far too optimistic understanding of resignification. It has induced many theorists, activists and lay people to take up the battle for same-sex rights as the best way to rescue homosexuals from their condition of abjection and unspeakability. Yet, it will be my claim that, paradoxically, it was the inner transformations brought about by these very battles that produced further exclusion and marginalization among queer sexualities.

Normalizing the queer imaginary: old oppositions and new allegiances

According to many scholars and observers (Warner 1999; Seidman 2002; Richardson 2005), current struggles for same-sex rights are to a greater or lesser extent at odds with former lesbian and gay battles. The pitiless critique of the most rooted intuitions about sex, family and kinship, triggered by the rise of erstwhile lesbian, gay and bisexual social movements, has been superseded by the demand for liberal equality. A good deal of studies show that since the 1980s a widespread “homonormativity” (Duggan 2003) has taken over previous understandings of gay sexualities and lives. The process of substituting queer sexualities (and their critique of ordinary sexual culture) for domesticated same-sex ones is epitomized by the maxim ‘We get marriage and the military then we go home and cook dinner, forever’ (2003: 62). Despite a few critical voices (e.g. Brown 2012), in the field of queer studies most of the scholars who support this vision concur that homonormativity flags an irretrievable shift in the relation between homosexual sexualities and the broader society.

Although the direct, innate link between subversion and homosexuality is debatable (see e.g. Green 2005), the idea that homosexual sexualities are able to exert an erosive effect on mainstream sexuality, its lexicon and its core institutions was bolstered by lesbians and gay men themselves. To mention a famous example, the Manifesto of the Gay Liberation Front (first edition 1971, revised edition 1978) singled out well-determined sites of oppression (that is, family, school, the media, employment, the law, physical violence and psychiatry) and openly professed the intent to rid society of their ‘decaying and constricting ideology’ and ‘together with other oppressed groups [...] start to form a new order, and a liberated lifestyle’. Nevertheless, as early as the 1980s, in conjunction with the rise of new forms of liberalism throughout Europe and the USA, a

good deal of homosexual organizations took the view that homosexuality has neither inner revolutionary force nor any power to subvert culture (Richardson 2004: 396). Rather, homosexuals should stress that they are basically alike and that hostility towards them is but the result of prejudice, which education and peaceful coexistence will brush away.

The differences between old and new approaches are palpable. At least two main sticking points deserve to be highlighted. Firstly, former homosexual radicalism, together with women's liberation movements, was engaged in struggles aimed at getting rid of the alleged "unnaturalness" and "abnormality" of homosexuality, but without constructing a "natural" and "normal" homosexual. In other words, erstwhile movements repudiated strategies founded on the idea of a biological root of all types of sexual orientation. They intended to achieve the liberation of homosexuals by contesting and eventually dismantling core institutions and cultural values of the political regime and the social setting they excoriated. Secondly, such battles aspired to pose a threat to multiple forms of injustice, exclusion and abjection, which did not merely target homosexuals, but created overlapping spheres of oppression, linked to different and often intersecting traits, from colour and race to class and religion.

Quite the opposite, a variety of theoretical and empirical studies show that these attitudes hardly characterize today's homosexuals' political engagement. Firstly, at present mainstream strategies to obtain rights and benefits traditionally granted to heterosexual people are mainly based on the claimed "naturalness" of homosexual sexual orientation, rooted in biology (see Stein 1999). Secondly, most existing homosexual movements consider the adherence to the battles of other oppressed groups as alien. Gay authors such as Bruce Bawer and Andrew Sullivan contend the current scenario is post-

liberationist and post-queer: homosexuals have to stand up for the basic right to equal treatment as respectable citizens who deserve full integration within the body politic (Seidman 2002). But what is it that favoured such a noticeable shift?

According to critics, there are two main driving forces behind normalization. First, the spread of neoconservative movements around the 1990s (e.g. Patton 1993; Richardson 2004). Despite a few differences I cannot examine here, in all Western societies members of these movements began to advance “integrationist” arguments at odds with the idea that homosexuality serves as a form of cultural subversion. They started claiming that homosexuals just want to be perceived as “normal” citizens, who wish to be fully integrated into society *as it is*. Such a relevant change in the “attitude” of gay movements gave way to a wide-ranging political project rooted in a “politics of assimilation” whereby differences should be minimized and similarities exalted. The core assumption of this politics is that the only way to attain equality and redress the disadvantaged condition of homosexuals is to embrace liberal reformist positions that do away with previous intents to bring about a revolution in the intuitions and institutions of straight culture. This new assumption holds that – as long as every sexual orientation is natural and as long as gays and straights lifestyles are not essentially at odds – homosexuals can conceive and present themselves as good citizens, good parents, good teachers and good politicians *within* the existing social order (Brookes 2009).

A second driving force behind lesbian/gay normalization, connected to the first, is the transformation of the type of legal and political claims advanced by lesbians, gays and bisexuals. If earlier campaigners raised “conduct-based rights” claims centred on the rights of consenting adults to engage in sexual intercourse, the move which occurred in the 1990s prompted homosexuals to raise “identity-based rights” claims (Richardson

2000a). While conduct-based rights claims are designed to defend the social admissibility of conducts (neither only nor necessarily sexual) that are excluded because they are (claimed to be) detrimental to society; identity-based rights claims are essentially bound up with a stable, identifiable, isolable group: the homosexuals. The difference between these two types of claims proves crucial. In fact, not only does it explain why former insistence on the intersection of the multiple forms of oppression, whether sexual or not, was replaced by inward-looking pushes for gay rights. Even more importantly, identity-based rights claims prompted homosexual movements to concentrate on *sexual categories* (homosexuals as natural beings with natural rights who deserve integration) rather than *sexual practices* (the permissibility of a wide range of conducts that are unjustly targeted as harmful to society) and to claim that the latter are justifiable only as expressions of the former. As a result, many battles for homosexuals' rights today are spearheaded by a thick notion of sexual identity whereby homosexual subjects are claimed to deserve full recognition because they are the bearers of natural tendencies and hence legitimately inclined to pursue self-fulfilment within their own society.

Based on that, critics tend to speak of a "queer liberalism", committed to a "post-race" and "colour-blind" conception of justice (Eng 2007). These changes can be interpreted as a wholesale shift toward the pursuit of inclusion within those institutions that previous homosexual movements regarded as sites of oppression to be done away with. As predicted by Schneider, homosexuals have become much more keen to form domestic units and to engage in struggles intended to get access to traditional institutions. Homosexuals seem to have undergone an "anthropological metamorphosis", as they exhibit a convinced adhesion to a model that scholars (Weeks et al. 1999: 706) summarize as the 'young, white, married, heterosexual, able-bodied, family with bread-winning

husband, dependent wife and children who share a residence and whose central relationship will be monogamous and last forever'. In other words, homosexuals converge on a conceptual grid that tends to frame their desires and aspirations with the vocabulary of heterosexual relationships.

The spread of this new vision of homosexuality accounts for what can be defined as a 'stampede toward marriage in the gay community' (Franke 2004: 1418), which figures as the epitome of the broad shift I have described so far. Critics are not blind to the broad set of benefits, protections and rights that marriage grants (e.g. among others, with national variations, income tax breaks, spousal social security, pension benefits, claims to child custody, conjugal visits and inheritance rights). However, they claim same-sex marriage is by no means the only way to fairly redistribute them (see e.g. Polikoff 2008). Critics highlight the symbolic aspects of marriage precisely because the obstinate struggle to get access to it draws our attention away from alternative and more incisive transformations of the juridico-political setting of Western societies – one that would be able to reconcile the need for a fair distribution of rights and benefits in family law with a comprehensive attempt at reducing other kinds of inequality (see e.g. Redding 2010).

It is my claim, however, that most seminal studies on normalization fail to grasp the genuine source of normalization: homosexuals' allegiance to the traditional model of intimate relationship, signposted and sanctioned by the legal institution of marriage, is not a *by-product* but an *active factor* of the shift I spotlighted. In other words, the two driving forces I singled out above overshadow one of the most relevant factors behind the changes in homosexuals' attitudes and desires. In the following section, I will claim that, as Schneider points out in his reply to Hayden, homosexuals' proclivity for normalization

was brought into life by homosexuals themselves and their reliance on categories and classifications produced by the hegemonic culture.

Ubiquitous normality?

So far, so good: critical analyses examined above prove that homonormativity is efficiently exerting effects and is transmuting the agenda of homosexual movements, which, in their turn, are becoming more and more organized and disposed to promote specific sets of interests. Nevertheless, the question raised in the first section remains: is homonormativity the symbol of a defeat whereby progressive and radical queers have been superseded by liberal, conservative gays? Or, rather, can such a predictable defeat be attributed to an overoptimistic and delusional view of resignification, one that induced homosexuals to believe that they would successfully effect changes in the set of meanings and standards that shape heteronormative culture? Even more importantly, can the root of all evils be the way in which homosexuals have categorized their own identity as a group and have framed the issue of emancipation?

Susan Stryker (2008) has suggested that current critics are not the first to employ the catchword “homonormativity”, as it was used by trans-activists to depict ‘an intuitive, almost self-evident, back-formation [...] suitable for use where homosexual community norms marginalized other kinds of sex/gender/sexuality difference’ (2008: 147). To put it otherwise, well before the emergence of neoconservative trends, Stryker underscores that homonormativity had already made deep inroads into lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender intergroup dynamics. On this account, the *domain of difference* was already

fragmented into a multiplicity of *different domains*. In particular, according to Stryker, one of the stepping stones to the current homonormative scenario is that sexual orientation was mistakenly adopted as the epitome of queerness, to the extent that other features would paradoxically come across as “unnatural”. Stryker submits that the archetypal divorce between what she labels “orientation queer” and “gender queer” paved the way for the normalization of a range of queer people (namely, those who were attracted to people of the same gender but were at ease with their own gender) and the parallel ghettoization of others (namely, those who, whatever their sexual orientation might be, were dissatisfied with their gender and could not accept the heteronormative structuration of society based on the male/female bipartition).

Stryker’s analysis appears as particularly compelling insofar as she claims that the dominance of orientation homosexuals favoured a given categorization of reality, one that produced a distorting misconception of transgender subjects as belonging to a *distinct and distinguishable* group. If we return to Bourdieu’s and Schneider’s considerations exposed in the first section, we can see how the dominant classificatory matrix of the division between male and female was surreptitiously lurking beneath the production of new, divisive, stigmatizing intergroup categories. Being “trans” – which Stryker (2008: 148) claims to be a “modality” rather than a “category” – was assumed as a further peculiar category, which did ‘not trouble the basis of the other categories’. The misconception as a distinct gender along with the tripartition of sexual orientations (man, woman, trans) allowed internal subcategories of good homosexuals to become legible through the categories at work within heterosexuals. Distinctions and divisions typical of the heteronormative culture were endorsed and applied by homosexuals themselves, who, as Bourdieu (2001: 31) observed, had ‘internalized the dominant point

of view' and had adopted 'this point of view on themselves', to such a degree that they ceased challenging the sharp distinction between genders and almost entirely concentrated on sexual orientation as the quintessence of queerness.

The Butlerian expropriation of the dominant discourse essentially occurred within a bounded and controlled process of resignification, whereby "reinscribed" meanings could easily be matched with existing ones and accommodated within unchallenged previous classifications. It is even more difficult to track the action of such a bounded resignification when seemingly innovative progressions hide or contribute to hiding rear-guard responses of previous classifications. A telling example of resignification's Janus-face is provided by Karl Bryant (2008), who recounts how a momentous step toward the liberation of homosexuals, such as the removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders III* in 1980, has been used to target other, perhaps more disquieting sexualities. Bryant explains and comments on how such a delisting was followed by the listing of a different disorder, the Gender Identity Disorder in Children (GIDC). Bryant does not aim to delve into the question of whether or not such a new entry was a direct and intentional reaction to the removal of homosexuality. Rather, he claims that, be this as it may, the GIDC proved instrumental in the reinforcement of homonormative standards. Indeed, he demonstrates how, although the GIDC has nothing to do with curing homosexuals, it can be utilized by (not necessarily malevolent) doctors and clinicians as a way of 'shaping (e.g. producing) them in their preferred form – as gender conforming, upstanding, "very straight" gays' (2008: 466). Here again we are confronted with a resignification that eventuates in a renewed oppressive scenario with different actors.

It is worth following this clue, as it confirms that the resignifying and liberating readjustment of the categories structuring the sexist and heterosexist principle of vision and division led to the reinforcement of this very principle. Bryant insists that the critique of heteronormativity resulted in a stronger homonormativity and that the idea of homosexuality as a “natural kind” was intended to produce a gay that might fit the division between men and women: ‘[T]he more complicated and perhaps more insidious relationship between GIDC and homosexuality is not about the vision of a homosexual-free world, but rather about a world where homosexuality manifests in ways that are stamped with heteronormative ideals’ (2008: 468). The trade-off which involved orientation queer and mainstream society concerned, on the one hand, the reworking of a category that had proved harmful to homosexuals and, on the other hand, the exclusion of sexualities who could never reach a compromise with the sexist and heterosexist binary men/women. In other words, the removal of homosexuality from the list of disorders – a significant sign of greater openness to lesbians and gays – contributed to the achievement of the two homonormative aims underscored by Stryker: first, the production of a well distinguished and sealed-off category of homosexuals (namely, those who accept their gender and the bipartition of genders and yet are attracted to people of the same gender); second, the stigmatization of other forms of queerness as pathological and unnormal.

Developments that at face value are undeniable progressions reveal themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, as elements of a broader process of inner readjustment of the categories of classification that shore up social reality and make its constitutive elements legible/understandable/speakable. Whether inadvertently or not – and this has certainly to do with the multifaceted composition of queer movements and organizations – queer people helped identify and redefine “acceptable” expressions of sexuality. One of the

paradoxical consequences of homosexuals' struggle for equal rights is that it has set a new benchmark for distinguishing acceptable from deviant, natural from unnatural, and normal from abnormal queerness. The push for inclusion turned into the reinforcement of other forms of exclusion, mainly based on failure to comply with norms of gender performance and monogamy. As a result, 'a matrix of hegemony is recreated and re-legitimated' (O'Brien 2008: 500).

A further key aspect of such a trapping resignification is that some side effects of categorization are not immediately perceptible. If the exclusionary power it exerts on queer people who do not fit the category can be more or less easily brought to surface, it is much less simple to show that it was precisely this categorization that changed the political agenda of homosexual movements. In reality, making homosexuals fit for the heterosexual principle of vision and division definitely minimized the risk that, as the Manifesto mentioned above cried out, homosexuals might team up with other oppressed groups so as to challenge the old order and to give life to a new one. In this case, the production of the category that created the good homosexuals was accompanied with covert and tacit strategies (a set of 'micropolitical practices', to borrow Stryker's [2008: 153] effective locution) meant to marginalize the radical implications of those queer subgroups who regarded queerness as a modality – one that can be, and often is, combined with other elements characterizing the condition of abject subjectivities.

If this is so, this categorization at work in intergroup dynamics served two main purposes. Firstly, it aimed at individuating, isolating and bounding a range of people who could be recognized and thus classified on the basis of their sexual orientation, with no need, however, to dislodge traditional classifications. Secondly, it managed to set good homosexuals apart from other minorities: not only those who could immediately be

recognized as intragroup unfit subjects, like transgender and transvestites; but also extra-groups oppressed subjects, such as workers, migrants, racialized minorities and diasporic collectivities, who might be interested in joining lesbian and gay people in more comprehensive struggles against the hegemonic culture. As I pointed out before, these two purposes are intertwined: it was the categorization of homosexuals on the sole basis of their sexual orientation that both induced them to endorse traditional heteronormative distinctions and severed their ties with other rebellious groups who were raising similar criticisms against the legal and political organization of Western societies.

Homosexual intimacy, apolitical privateness

One of the chief aims of my analysis was to cast some light on the ambiguous relation between inclusion and the production of further exclusion in various processes of resignification that helped locate homosexual sexualities among non-pathological expressions of love and sex. Although some scholars understand the changes occurred in the last decades as positive upshots of a creative and defiant use of such an ambiguity, whereby homosexual subjects and organizations were able to defy preceding categories and classifications, the previous section aimed to identify the subtle way in which categories and classifications tamed defiance and even exploited it in order to readjust the mobile boundaries of normality.

If struggles lauded by gay rights advocates did erode features of the dominant culture detrimental to homosexuals, such as the ban on same-sex sexual orientation and the inclusion of homosexuality among mental disorders, such progressions were not

costless. As Bourdieu and Schneider contended in their exchanges with (respectively) Butler and Hayden, the cultural matrix turned out to be capable of redressing misuse. In the light of such a seemingly hermetic circle, within which what appears as a subversive misappropriation turns into a self-surrender to the cultural matrix, getting access to the field of the normal required formerly oppressed subjects to help redefine the range of the new oppressed. In this concluding section, I would like to identify the platform where this trade-off has taken place and the main channel of its innumerable effects. I will claim that the platform is the language of the liberal legal order whereas the channel is the centripetal force of its legitimating institutions.

Teemu Ruskola's (2005) perceptive article on the complicated relation between gay rights and queer theory advances the hypothesis that liberal regulation does not simply *permit* homosexuals to form unions, but seeks to make them *desire* to form unions. In effect, in a political framework where the government of individuals rests on the government of the relationships they establish, the liberal state favoured a momentous compromise: the reworking of the categories that determine what counts as a normal instance of a practice (in this case, sexual orientation within sexual practices) would be achieved by the depoliticization and neutralization of the "public appeal" of queer struggles. As the state started to recognize the right of same-sex persons to get access to one of its capital institutions, so did a wide range of homosexuals (those who could afford it) start to perceive and to think of themselves through the emotional and relational vocabulary that society offered opposite-sex individuals. It should therefore come as no surprise if the state began to accommodate non-heterosexual sexualities when the latter started feeling (or acquiring) the desire to conduct and develop their sexual life within the sphere that was traditionally reserved for heterosexual intimacy, that is, the family: 'It is

only when the state is able to imagine legitimate homosexual intimacies entitled to “privacy” that homosexuals become deserving of “dignity” and “respect” in the public spheres of the liberal polity’ (2005: 245).

If this is true, then the undebatable triumph of same-sex unions and same-sex marriage in most Western countries should not be regarded as one of the consequences, but as one of the channels of normalization. In fact, I do not want to deny that the same-sex marriage issue has also to do with the growing need to find a private economic solution to structural problems stemming from the breakdown of the welfare system (Freeman 2002). Yet, I believe this to be far less relevant than the very counter-resignifying possibility to use the jargon of legitimate unions and official marriage in order to confer social legibility on homosexual concerns. This semiotic shift allowed couching the question of homosexuality with the available lexicon of the heterosexual organization of intimate life, so that homosexuals might be subsumed under categories that made their desires understandable to their fellow citizens, and their concerns speakable also by those who were fond of traditional institutions.

Lest I am misunderstood, I want to make it clear that advocates of the liberating power of same-sex rights do make a point when they emphasize that a far smaller number of homosexuals today feel, and actually are, jeopardized thanks to a series of tenacious legal and political struggles (see e.g. Eskridge 2013). My intention here is to show that this has been made possible by way of a historic compromise that left the dominant culture and its classifications off the hook. A critical understanding of these developments, thus, requires us to consider the ways in which such new sexual rights have been capable of instituting ‘their own regime of normalcy’ (Ruskola 2005: 244). We are called upon to assess whether or not these developments turned out to enhance the Bourdesian

dehistoricization and externalization of social categories and to sanctify the inseparable association between *intimacy and coupledness* – what Michael Cobb (2007: 449) calls ‘the ideology of the couple’. To explore this issue, the question has to be tackled of how those who once considered the family as a site of oppression today crave for it.

I should like to refer again to Cobb’s cunning analysis as he remarks that the bygone frame of queer critique, so averse to the traditional institution of family, has been superseded by today’s family-friendly attitudes because of the nature of the institutions that shore up the family, that is, marriage and coupledness: ‘[T]he marriage form (and its not-so-distant child, the couple form) is for not only intimate stability but also for judicial, political, and cultural legibility that belongs to and exceeds official state regulation’ (2007: 452). As Bourdieu points out, a key social battle regards the access to what he calls the universe of the feasible and thinkable. If entering this universe implies being empowered to perform successful speech acts, this very empowerment required those who are not feasible and thinkable to adopt a language that had long excluded them and did not naturally belong to them. Legibility had to be attained by way of a category that was strikingly at odds with the public disruptiveness and the disruptive publicness of queer critique, that is, intimacy, elective choice and individual happiness – in short, the sematic repertoire with which an age-old tradition had long couched the notion of family. This is the basic unit, the nuclear cell of Western society, where the link highlighted above between choice and blood marks off a sacred inviolable sphere of privateness.

The lexicon of intimacy, together with the longing for coupledness, proved key to homosexuals’ getting access to the realm of public legibility. Whether or not this crucial shift was accompanied by genuine intents to resignify family and kinship, as Weston and Hayden contend, the traditional institutional vocabulary took the homosexual imaginary

captive. Resignification backfired on them and made use of available intergroup categories amenable to heteronormative classifications. Such an unexpected alignment forced former opponents of the traditional view of intimacy to endorse the uniqueness, naturalness and spontaneity of coupledness, 'to carnalize it in a truth resistant to freedom as such' (Povinelli 2007: 573).

This is evidence that homosexuals could speak and voice their concerns as soon as they forsook outward-looking political engagement, one that was able to join up with other battles, and engaged in inward-looking juridico-political strategies whereby they could get the peaceful benefit of a secure and tranquil private life. In the political life of most Western countries, intimacy has served as a social metaphor able both to mobilize a poignant concept – '[t]he romantic discourse surrounding marriage "speaks" to the mainstream and raises awareness of our relationships' (Peel and Harding 2004) – and to utilize the typical language of liberal rights. As Ruskola (2005: 239) comments with respect to the momentous US Supreme Court decision *Lawrence and Garner v. State of Texas* (2003), in 'reading the opinion, one would think that homosexuals exist *only* in relationships, and that relationships are the *only* context in which homosexuals might conceivably engage in sex acts'.

Conclusion

The shift I have examined thus far can be interpreted as a much more general one, which has to do with the particularization of political and legal actions. The erasure of complex critical enterprises with which previous generations were so familiar, today are regarded

as unfeasible and perhaps deceptive utopias. Before the 1980s the struggle to make queer sexualities visible, legible, speakable formed part of a more comprehensive attempt at undoing available categories and classifications, so as to fight multiple sites of oppression. Quite the reverse, today's homosexuals' activism seems aimed at the readjustment of available categories and classifications, so as to make some room for previously excluded subjectivities.

In this article I wanted to understand whether this shift is fuelled and governed by alien, external, independent political factors, or rather it is rooted in humans' spontaneous tendency to rely on the available. In that respect, I claimed that the leeway for internal revision is limited, since defiance and misuse of isolated elements of a hegemonic culture can hardly prompt radical changes. However, this conclusion does not merely aim to provide a disenchanting diagnosis of a misplaced hope. In fact, it is also a plea for a more orchestrated and audacious reappropriation of the right to question the distribution itself of the power to define categories and produce classifications. Such a far-reaching outcome cannot be achieved by the use of available categories and classifications, however astute and well-placed it may be. Rather, critical movements should reintroduce in the political agenda the much more general and yet decisive question of symbolic domination, whereby social actors could come to challenge the seemingly undoable lexicon of the existing institutional framework. Only that way will those who are called upon to avail themselves of socially constructed institutions have the concrete chance to determine whether or not such institutions meet their needs.

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