



# Marriage and the Spare Bedroom: Exploring the Sexual Politics of Austerity in Britain

Gavin Brown<sup>1</sup>

Department of Geography  
University of Leicester  
University Road  
Leicester LE1 7RH, UK.  
gpb10@le.ac.uk

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## Abstract

Heteronormativity and homonormativity are connected. Changing social attitudes to homosexuality and the creation of new homonorms influence changing social norms around heterosexuality. To study the emerging sexual politics of austerity it is important to consider how normative social attitudes to both heterosexual and homosexual relations are changing in the current period. This paper examines two recent social policy developments in the UK to this end. It interrogates the debates about 'marriage equality' for same sex couples in conjunction with recent changes to welfare benefits, particularly the 'Bedroom Tax' which penalises social housing tenants receiving housing benefits, if they are deemed to be living in accommodation with more bedrooms than they need. While marriage equality (re)privileges certain types of couples and domestic economies, simultaneous attacks on the welfare system are disproportionately affecting single people and those couples who find their relationships outside the reconfigured normative values of austerity Britain. The paper concludes by considering what these changes reveal about the sexual politics of austerity and the role of mainstream lesbian and gay advocacy groups in shaping them.



**Keywords:** homonormativity; austerity; same-sex marriage; Bedroom Tax; England and Wales

## Introduction

Heteronormativity and homonormativity are connected. Too often, commentators concentrate on how heteronorms shape dominant expressions of (and attitudes to) homosexuality. Relations that flow in the other direction tend to be overlooked. However, changing social attitudes to homosexuality and the creation of new homonorms influence changing social norms around heterosexuality. To study the emerging sexual politics of austerity it is important to consider how normative social attitudes to both heterosexual and homosexual relations are changing in the current period. This short paper examines two recent social policy developments in the UK to this end. It interrogates the debates about 'marriage equality' for same sex couples in conjunction with recent changes to welfare benefits, particularly the 'Bedroom Tax' which penalises social housing tenants receiving housing benefits, if they are deemed to be living in accommodation with more bedrooms than they need. In the process, I suggest, the faultline of sexual politics in the UK has shifted from being placed (primarily) along the homo/hetero binary.

Since 2010, the Coalition Government in Britain have pursued social and economic policies which have undermined state welfare provision, outsourcing the delivery of key services to private contractors and encouraging those citizens who can afford to do so to take responsibility for their own welfare in the private sector. Politicians have stoked moral panics about 'benefits scroungers', increasing the abjection of the unemployed, long-term disabled, and the working poor (Tyler, 2013). At the same time as these economically conservative policies have been advanced, there has continued to be a liberalisation of social attitudes towards homosexuality in Britain, including the introduction of same-sex marriage in 2014. In the 2013 British Social Attitudes survey (BSA30), almost half of respondents (46.7%) stated that they believed "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex [is] not wrong at all" and a further 10% stated such relationships were 'rarely wrong' (Park et al., 2013) This paper argues that whilst these social and economic policies are not causally linked, neither are they entirely coincidental. It brings together recent attacks on welfare recipients in Britain with debates on same-sex marriage to consider how they might articulate a wider sexual politics of austerity.

Any theorization of sexual politics in the current period needs to account for the uneven geographies of austerity *and* sexual citizenship. Although there may be common or similar debates in different national contexts, the articulation of the emerging politics of austerity is specific to given places. Periodically, over the last two decades, there have been calls to take the materiality of class differences seriously within the geographies of sexualities (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Binnie, 2011). In a time of austerity, this is particularly important. Valentine and Harris (2014: 84) note that the rejection of class as a useful category of analysis has

occurred "at a time when there has been a rapid growth in inequality and an increased readiness to demonise the poor in political and media discourses". This paper examines how, as those same-sex couples who choose marriage are incorporated into the mainstream, supposedly 'improper' expressions of sexual and intimate relations are being used to justify the impoverishment and marginalisation of other class fractions. I question whether, more so than before, the self-reliant couple is being promoted over households that cannot provide for their own welfare needs.

### **The sexual politics of neoliberalism**

One of the key arguments of this paper is that the hetero/homosexual binary is being reworked in contemporary sexual politics. As more and more LGBTQ people are included within the 'charmed circle' (Rubin, 2012) of normative sexual politics, so other people's intimate lives are denigrated and become abject. To understand how same-sex marriage might be used to discipline other forms of intimacy, it is important first to understand the development of new forms of 'homonormativity' as an expression of contemporary sexual politics.

Social, legal and political attitudes towards homosexuality are becoming more uneven and (seemingly) polarised around the world. While some countries enact increasingly repressive legislation, or renege on earlier moves towards the liberalization of anti-gay laws, something close to full legal equality for lesbians and gay men<sup>2</sup> is being achieved in a growing number of other countries. Scholars have noted these trends for more than a decade now, with many keenly debating why the liberalisation of social attitudes towards homosexuality has gained pace since the early 1990s (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2005; Weeks, 2007). These changes have been described as a new expression of 'homonormativity' (Duggan, 2002).

Even where new equalities legislation has come into operation, the effects of these social changes have often been complex and contradictory. The benefits from these changes are not felt universally and some sexual and gender minorities have lost out (materially and symbolically) as a result. Stable, long-term same-sex couples with the social and economic resources to look after each other's well-

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, I have deliberately referred to 'lesbians and gay men' (rather than 'LGBT' or 'LGBTQ' people) for a number of reasons. First, this is because I believe the dynamics of moves towards legal recognition and formal equality for trans people in the UK are distinct and different from those for lesbians and gay men. Second, although some legal changes have sought to challenge and outlaw discrimination on the basis of 'sexual orientation' (inclusively), debates around 'same-sex marriage' have tended to be presented in a way that perpetuates the social invisibility of bisexual people. Elsewhere in the paper, when I want to refer to sexual and gender minorities more generally, I tend to use the acronym 'LGBTQ' (whilst recognising that this is contested and does not adequately capture some of emerging sexual minority identities). To the extent that I use the term 'queer' in this paper, I use it specifically to refer to queer theory and to related forms of activism that are identified as 'queer' by their participants.

being are celebrated by politicians of all shades - it seems lesbian and gay life has been domesticated.

When Duggan (2002: 179) first identified 'the new homonormativity', she conceptualised it as an expression of the sexual politics of neoliberalism. In considering this definition, it is useful to approach neoliberalism not only as an economic theory, but also as a mode of governmentality that promotes personal responsibility and expressions of individual autonomy articulated predominantly through marketized 'free choice' (Weiss, 2011). The neoliberal state seeks to 'roll [itself] back' from many areas of welfare provision and has incorporated (and rewarded) those LGBTQ people who have been prepared to privatise their own welfare provision within the household. In the process, particular expressions of 'intimacy' have been placed at the centre of social policy implementation. Proximity to 'proper' expressions of intimacy and care (more than sexual identity itself) has come to shape who is "recognised as a proper citizen, a legal subject, a welfare recipient, a familial member and a coherent, legitimately 'partnered' person," (Sanger and Taylor, 2013: 3).

One of the problems with research on homonormativity over the last decade is that it has tended to take neoliberalism as singular, without recognising the varying ways in which neoliberal policies have been enacted in different places (Brenner et al., 2010), or recognising that other economic relations continue to persist alongside 'neoliberalism' (Gibson-Graham, 2006). In recent work, Rossi (2013) has outlined three variegations of capitalism, based around different ontological *dispositifs*. The three ontological dispositifs he identifies are: embeddedness, dispossession, and subsumption. He also argues that these dispositifs are instrumental in different processes of subjectification, helping to renew enduring, popular belief in capitalism (even in times of crisis) (Rossi, 2013).

The second and third of Rossi's ontologies of capitalism (dispossession and subsumption) are, perhaps, most relevant to my discussion of the sexual politics of austerity. Rossi (2013: 351) outlines that "the category of dispossession is evocative of a sovereignty-based ontology associated with capitalism, which allows this mode of production to act as a sovereign and colonizing force within the existing politico-economic order at multiple geographical scales". This approach is associated with the privatisation of previously public services (Harvey, 2005). It can also be perceived within new regimes of lending, debt and the 'financialization of home' (Aalbers, 2008), which are entangled in very material ways with the extension of marriage to same-sex couples. Floyd (2009) argues that same-sex marriage and broader expressions of 'homonormativity' are an example of accumulation by dispossession precisely because they enclose and privatise the forms of knowledge, and the infrastructures of care and intimacy that gay men developed as 'queer commons' in the 1970s. Floyd (2009) primarily thinks of the 'queer commons' as public sites where gay and trans people cruised for homosexual and created counterpublics. Increasingly such spaces have been privatised (in ownership and function) for real estate speculation. We could also think of the

grassroots volunteer 'buddying' networks that were created to support the sick and dying in the early years of the AIDS pandemic as erstwhile 'queer commons' that have been increasingly professionalized and taken out of shared community control. This is not, however, to suggest that all 'queer commons' have been dispossessed by processes of capitalist accumulation – some persist (albeit precariously) and new commons are formed (see also, Brown, 2009: 1505).

In contrast, the dispositif of 'subsumption' draws on the work of thinkers (in the tradition of Italian autonomist Marxism) who have reinterpreted "Foucault's notion of biopolitics in light of their understanding of knowledge-based capitalism" (Rossi, 2013: 351). These authors have theorized "the dynamic of contemporary capitalism as driven by the real subsumption of 'life itself'," (Rossi, 2013: 351). For theorists like Hardt and Negri (2000) this "is transforming the very nature of capitalism through the incorporation of knowledges, emotions, affects, and linguistic qualities within the capitalist process of production and socialization" (Rossi, 2013: 359). Queer critique often focuses on the failings of the more assimilationist strands of the lesbian and gay movement, whose rights-based claims have been realised in the homonormative equalities legislation of the last two decades. However, attention to processes of subsumption suggests that the more Dionysian aspects of gay male subcultures have also been recuperated in various ways. The appropriation of 'living labour' in the form of knowledge, information, images and social relationships has become integral to contemporary capitalist reproduction (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 142- 144). Here we might think about the complex ways in which lesbian and gay social movement demands for 'equality' (and, to an extent, queer critiques of them too) have been utilized to develop new forms of biopolitical control (which, I suggest, affect heterosexual populations too) and new markets for consumption. In the context of this paper, we might think about the new goods and services associated with the same-sex wedding market (but there are many other examples).

In beginning to think about the sexual politics of austerity, it is important to remember that homonormativity is not just a project of the national state and corporate business. The validation of particular expressions of 'respectable' lesbian and gay life (at the exclusion of others) is also reproduced in the activities of lesbian and gay advocacy groups, health services, and local government service provision (amongst others). The striving for 'sameness' by some lesbians and gay men tends to deride and overlook the plurality of LGBTQ communities (Richardson, 2005). This is important, but rather than (just) thinking about how the new homonormativity produces new faultlines between sexual and gender minorities, it is also important to examine how homonormative values might redefine social norms around *all* sexualities and relationship types.

### **Debating marriage equality (in England and Wales)**

On 17 July 2013, same-sex marriages became legal in England and Wales as the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act* received Royal Assent and entered into law.

The proposal to allow same-sex marriages in (parts of) the UK had the support of the leadership of all three main parliamentary parties. However, it should be noted that although this legislation allows lesbians and gay people to marry, it does not offer *full* legal equality between same-sex and opposite-sex marriages – for example, religious organisations need to actively 'opt in' to offering same-sex marriages and the established Churches of England and Wales are banned by law from doing so at present<sup>3</sup>.

Although the parliamentary debates about the Bill provoked some virulently homophobic statements from a small minority of politicians, the legislation passed through both houses of Parliament with very comfortable majorities. In the process the voting revealed some telling patterns - for example, while some parliamentarians invoked their Christian ethics to oppose the legislation, all Muslim MPs voted in favour of same-sex marriage.

But, I am not so much interested in the opposition to same-sex marriage as some of the arguments mobilized in favour of it, as I believe these reveal far more about the assumptions and expectations that underpin contemporary sexual politics in the UK. In their official submission to the Government's consultation on the proposed legislation by the lesbian and gay advocacy organisation, Stonewall (2012: 5) argued:

The Government's Impact Assessment rightly notes that many couples will wish to host celebrations and ceremonies upon their marriage. Consequently the extension of marriage to same-sex couples will provide a positive economic stimulus not just to businesses that provide services for such weddings but also to the Treasury through VAT receipts.

Marriage equality for same-sex couples was presented as being good for business and the national economy.

In an article for *Pink News* (31 May 2013) the Conservative minister for equalities, Helen Grant MP, argued that marriage equality would "strengthen marriage, ensuring it remains as relevant to our society as it ever was". Queer and feminist critiques of marriage are well-known: marriage legitimizes 'Family,' which is conceived as responsible, coupled and financially viable (Taylor, 2013a). As Kandaswamy (2008) and others have argued the benefits of same-sex marriage are "animated by *existing* inequalities" (Taylor, 2013a: 19).

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<sup>3</sup> There are five other, relatively small, ways in which the new legislation does not offer full legal equality. These include: differences in the grounds for the annulment of a marriage; additional costs incurred in registering religious premises for the conduct of same-sex marriages; some limitations on pension inheritance rights for surviving spouses from same-sex marriages; inequities in relation to the status of marriages of some trans people; and the continuation of the ban on opposite-sex civil partnerships.

The language of marriage equality depoliticises economic inequalities, relocating them within the private sphere of the home. Drawing on a rich tradition of work in feminist geography, Domosh (1998) has noted that the home and the domestic sphere is a rich territory for studying how social relations are spatialized in people's intimate lives. Such spaces reveal much about a society's sexual politics and its understanding of the role of the family (Oswin, 2010), and the (multiscalar) place of social reproduction (Blunt, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2004). Early work in the geographies of sexualities presented 'the family home' as a contradictory space for members of sexual and gender minorities – a site saturated with silences, lies and the threat of violence (Johnston and Valentine, 1995). More recent work has examined how changing family dynamics, which offer supportive environments for lesbian and gay teens, might have the effect of changing the ideological relationship between the family home and the lives of sexual minorities (Gorman-Murray, 2008). Indeed, the ways in which lesbian and gay people present their identities through domestic environments can have a powerful role to play in normalizing same-sex relationships to family, friends and neighbours (Gorman-Murray, 2007). Both the re-making of the homes of same-sex couples (through 'marriage equality') and, as explored next, the un-making of some welfare recipients' homes (through the 'Bedroom Tax') demonstrate that the home is a site through which 'intimate geopolitics' are played out and contested (Brickell, 2012; 2014).

Many issues debated in relation to same-sex marriage are not new, and their effects were already seen in Britain with the introduction of Civil Partnerships for same-sex couples in 2005. Browne (2011) noted that, as a result of the *Civil Partnership Act*, all co-habiting same-sex couples became recognised in law *as couples* for the purpose of assessing their eligibility for certain welfare benefits. Many couples that became "classified as 'living as if civil partners' for benefit purposes" (Browne, 2011: 101) for the first time, lost out financially as a result. This move represented a significant shift of emphasis in the operation of the British welfare system. Prior to 2005, the welfare system had placed the heterosexual couple (and their children) at its heart (Wilkinson, 2013). As a result, some families were not recognised as such. Paradoxically, as a result of its heteronormative assumptions, the welfare system could benefit some same-sex couples, allowing them to claim two (proportionately higher) 'single' person's benefits (Browne, 2011: 102).

On the basis of the civic recognition of same-sex couples, first through civil partnerships and now through marriage, Wilkinson (2013: 206) has questioned whether "the inclusion of same-sex relationships could be seen to be simultaneously opening up *and* narrowing down the charmed circle of 'appropriate' intimacies". She suggests that "despite the supposed increasing acceptance of sexual diversity, an exclusionary rhetoric of 'family values' still continues to circulate *within* policies that are seeking to create equality" (Wilkinson, 2013: 206). Wilkinson (2013) charts a convergence of anxieties about the disintegration of the

nuclear family amongst politicians from both the centre Right and centre Left. Being 'pro-family' is no longer necessarily counterposed to being socially liberal about the recognition of same-sex partnerships. Wilkinson (2013: 207) acknowledges, "citizenship is no longer necessarily always founded upon a binary between heterosexual/homosexual but between the coupled and the non-coupled". The incorporation of newly recognised same-sex couples has material effects on those whose relationships (or lack of them) do not live up to this reconfigured ideal of family life (Taylor, 2013a; Wilkinson, 2013).

Wilkinson (2013: 211) acknowledges, however, that the shift to more legal rights for same-sex couples has not been won purely on the basis of the liberal values of "justice, inclusion and equality". A factor motivating these debates has also been "the rising economic cost of care provision for the state" (Wilkinson, 2013: 211). Marriage equality has been enacted in a period when many (European) countries are confronting a near-future "with a rising number of people needing care but with fewer people to provide it" (Wilkinson, 2013: 211). A report on civil partnerships for the Department of Trade and Industry (2004: 16; cited by Wilkinson, 2013: 211), states, "strengthening adult couple relationships not only benefits the couples themselves, but also other relatives they support and care for". This highlights the long-standing feminist recognition of the unpaid labour undertaken (mostly by women) in domestic settings. While it is useful to consider the ways in which the extension of 'marriage equality' reconfigures the meanings attached to domestic economies, it is also important to remember the biopolitical effects of recentring the self-reliant couple. Marriage equality affords new privacy to those couples that are seen to conform to its ideal, but simultaneously brings other forms of relationships, intimacy, and living arrangements under renewed scrutiny.

### **The Bedroom Tax**

It is in this context that I consider a second piece of recent legislation in the UK – the Bedroom Tax, a provision of *The Welfare Reform Act* – which was passed in 2012 and came into effect in April 2013. Strictly speaking, it is not a tax. The Coalition Government says that it is removing the 'spare room subsidy' from social housing tenants who receive state benefits. The government claims this puts social housing tenants (who rent from local councils or housing associations) at an advantage over those in the private rental sector.

The new rules affect housing benefit, a welfare benefit which is paid to low income tenants to help pay their rent. Under the new rules, families who are deemed to have more living space than they need by their local authorities have received a reduced payment. Tenants are now assessed for the number of bedrooms they need. Under these rules, each individual or couple is entitled to *one* bedroom, and children under 16 are expected to share bedrooms. Where a disabled person's full-time carer is also their partner, they are expected to share a bedroom, regardless of whether or not their condition, medical equipment or other adaptations



make this practical. Parents whose children do not live with them, but visit, are prevented from keeping a dedicated bedroom available for that child.

According to the BBC (2013), "the government estimates that 660,000 households will have their benefit cut, roughly a third of social sector claimants." Tenants lose 14% of their benefits if they are deemed to have a spare bedroom and 25% of their benefits if they are considered to have two or more spare rooms. The government claim this is an incentive to encourage tenants 'blocking' large homes they do not need to move to smaller properties. However, data published by the *Independent* newspaper (Dugan, 2013) suggests that there simply are not enough one and two bedroom social housing properties available in which to rehouse 96% of tenants who are being penalised by the Bedroom Tax.

Alongside these spending cuts, the eligibility criteria for various welfare benefits have been reconfigured and new punitive sanctions implemented for those not providing sufficient evidence that they are actively seeking work. With his usual forensic critique, the urban geographer, Tom Slater has noted how centrally narratives about family dysfunction feature in the conservative discourse of 'Broken Britain'. He suggests (2012: 17) that these

[d]rastic and punitive welfare reforms arguably constitute the centrepiece of a severe fiscal austerity package, where possibilities for a redistributive path are drowned out by the rhetoric of 'welfare dependent troubled families' causing society to crumble at the margins. (Slater, 2012: 17).

For the Coalition government, the level of spending on welfare benefits is "unaffordably high, particularly in a climate of fiscal austerity," and they further believe "that the current system of benefits discourages people from seeking work and encourages dependency, and that it is unfair because it enables some recipients to claim benefits that considerably exceed median earnings," (Hamnett, 2013: 2). Slater has very effectively charted the process by which Conservative politicians have drawn on 'evidence' from a variety of think tanks and policy institutes to actively produce misinformation and ignorance about the 'unfairness' of welfare spending.

While the Bedroom Tax devalues and threatens to materially disrupt family and kinship networks that enable low income households and families to survive (Stenning, 2014), the rhetoric that surrounds this policy does more profound violence to the lives it targets. Taylor (2013b) has questioned what it means to have your intimate life and domestic arrangements dismissed as 'spare', 'unoccupied' or 'vacant'. She goes on to suggest that some intimacies are made visible in these debates, while others are rendered invisible: "images and ideas of hyper-sexualized feral council dwellers, as surplus populations taking up too much room, sit alongside a rather silenced and stifled notion of (hetero)sexuality, represented, for example, in the familiar invocation of children's needs and rights" (Taylor, 2013b). I would suggest that the new found respectability of stable same-sex couples, is

increasingly being mobilized to discipline those families who are deemed to be 'broken' and 'unfairly' reliant on welfare benefits.

Although the bedroom tax devalues and denigrates certain people, relationships and living arrangements, it is also founded on (and further fosters) social anxiety about personal responsibility in social life. In their recent research on the lived experience of social difference and distinction, Valentine and Harris (2014: 89) found that both working-class and middle-class respondents emphasised,

the need for disabled people to make a contribution to society where possible (e.g. by undertaking paid work) rather than being dependent on welfare benefits, and stressing the importance of disabled people taking responsibility for their own lives rather than deserving 'special treatment' from the state.

They note a narrative of 'injustice' whereby working people are positioned as being unfairly treated by the state when it offers the most meagre welfare benefits to those unable to work and 'take responsibility' for their own lives. Valentine and Harris (2014: 91) conclude that these calls for individualised responsibility appeal to so many people precisely because they "resonate with the sense of socio-economic uncertainty and insecurity which is being experienced by both middle-class and working-class communities". Faced not just with austerity, but with the prospect of climate change, wars and civil unrest, people are anxious about maintaining their access to scarce resources in order to maintain their quality of life into the future. Social policy in Britain is being realigned to favour those who can take responsibility for making private arrangements for the future wellbeing of themselves and their families, however they are configured. In these terms, the financially secure, socially responsible same-sex couple is far less of a political concern to contemporary politicians than a welfare-reliant, low income, single parent family. Those who are able to plan, financially, for the future are rewarded with "a sense of security in an insecure world" (Valentine and Harris, 2014: 91), and are encouraged to look down on those who are unable to protect themselves from poverty and welfare dependency in the same ways. But, for many, the sufficiency of these individualised plans for financial security and health care are never guaranteed. This can be a further source of anxiety. The Institute of Precarious Consciousness (2014, n.p.) suggest that through the imperative to individual, privatised care provision for one section of the population, and the threat of benefit cuts and sanctions for those who are not in a position to mobilize any significant private assets, people are faced with "an absurd non-choice between desocialised inclusion and desocialised exclusion" with the effect that the resulting social anxiety threatens to break "all the coordinates of connectedness in setting of constant danger" with profound effects on the individual psyche.

## Conclusions

While marriage equality (re)privileges certain types of couples and domestic economies, simultaneous attacks on the welfare system are disproportionately affecting single people and those couples who find their relationships outside the reconfigured normative values of austerity-era Britain. These legal reforms position some domestic arrangements worthy of privacy and respect, whilst bringing other homes under closer biopolitical scrutiny and subjecting them to increased state intervention.

In conclusion, I want to consider what these changes might reveal about the sexual politics of austerity and the role of mainstream lesbian and gay advocacy groups in shaping them. There are two key points to make here. First, homonormative social relations do not only affect LGBTQ people. The incorporation of some (seemingly) normative same-sex couples into the mainstream of British society has had knock-on effects. For example, I do not think it is possible to separate the arguments that organisations like Stonewall have mobilized in advocating same-sex marriage (as being in the best interests of the national economy), from the material and ideological assaults on poor households and, particularly, welfare recipients. 'Family values' in Britain are in the process of being reconfigured. Second, and related to this, the faultlines of sexual politics in Britain are no longer, necessarily, along the homo/hetero divide. Some expressions of same-sex domesticity, based on long-term, romantic couples are being privileged over some forms of heterosexuality. The Coalition government's rhetoric of 'fairness' plays a key role here – 'equality' for same-sex couples is acceptable, as long as they are able to take care of each other's health and well-being, without 'unfairly' relying on state welfare benefits (paid for by others). These changing sexual politics facilitate the increasing privatization of current and future care arrangements. In doing so, they undermine existing socialized health and welfare provision. These changes also have biopolitical effects: both encouraging self-reliant subjectivities, but also subjecting those intimate arrangements that do not conform to these standards to new forms of discipline. The promotion of privatised, self-reliant subjectivities has the potential to further undermine and enclose surviving 'queer commons' and open them to new rounds of accumulation by dispossession.

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