



# **Introduction: The Sexual Politics of Austerity**

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## **The sexual politics of the neoliberalism/austerity *continuum***

Neoliberal rationality appears as common-sense (Hall and O'Shea, 2013) in almost every geographical region, forging political and economic agendas, as well as investing every domain of social and personal life (Brenner *et al*, 2010, Cooper, 2008, Harvey, 2005). In this respect, the affirmation of austerity politics as the main response to the global financial crisis originated in the US mortgage market from 2007 marks the triumph of the neoliberal order, its key-principles being intensified and unchallenged transnationally (Aalbers, 2013, Dardot and Laval, 2014, Peck, 2013). At the global scale the impact of the neoliberal reason on welfare regimes seems to be inescapable: cuts in services and public expenditure, the emergence of new contractual forms of public/private partnership (and ownership of assets), homeownership promoted as the key towards an asset-based



welfare provision through the expansion of credit and the consequent raising of indebtedness for the consumer-citizen (Aalbers, 2008, Ascoli and Ranci, 2002, Rolnik, 2013, Ronald, 2008, Watson, 2009). The main consequences of this global trend are rising inequalities, and increasing poverty, unemployment and indebtedness; whilst the hegemony of the neoliberal principle of self-responsibilization has led towards the progressive criminalization and blaming of people living in poverty (Taylor-Gooby, 2013, Wacquant, 2009). How do such processes impact on sexuality and sexual politics? The answer is at least twofold, highlighting the contradictory character of capitalism, defined by Bassi (2006) as the tension between *capture* and *escape*.

The neoliberalization of politics has been able to subsume most of the main demands for equality (on the basis of sexual orientation) across the Global North and beyond. In some places, this has also (or alternatively) included equality on the basis of gender identity. Indeed a progressive and selective inclusion of sexual 'others' has taken place in several countries with non-discrimination and equal access to the main institutions of the nation-state (such as marriage and military service) becoming basic principles defining contemporary liberal 'democracy'. Within this process, specific bodies and communities have gained prominent visibility and legitimacy. 'Tolerance' has become framed as one of the main factors associated with economic growth (Florida, 2002); as a result, (sub)national economies, notably cities, compete to attract the gay(-friendly) "creative class" (Rushbrook, 2002). Following Duggan's (2002) identification of these trends as a new form of 'homonormativity' (defined as an expression of the sexual politics of neoliberalism), many scholars have been quick to identify proliferating examples of homonormativity, which has often been associated with the exclusion of racialised Others through homonationalist citizenship formations (Nast, 2002, Puar, 2006) or, more generally, the affirmation of 'consumer citizenship' (Bell and Binnie, 2004). Duggan's identification of the new homonormativity as the sexual politics of neoliberalism was formulated when the global economy still appeared to be in a boom period. In this collection of essays, we question how the sexual politics of neoliberalism have changed since neoliberalism entered a period of crisis and the unfettered class warfare of revanchist 'austerity'.

However, neoliberal processes of legitimation leave behind all those 'unwanted' subjects who do not conform to socially hegemonic criteria of respectability: undocumented/illegal migrants, queers of colour, sex workers, people with HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities, trans and gender-variant people who do not conform to conventional gender performances, among others (Casey, 2007, Cover, 2013, Sothern, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. This has led several scholars to stress the need for intersectional, grounded, place-based analyses (Binnie, 2011, Haritaworn, 2007,

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, social attitudes to people in all of these groups are more complex, contradictory and geographically varied than our simple, illustrative list might suggest.

Hubbard, 2013, Rodó-de-Zárate, 2014, Seidman, 2011), going beyond what Michael Brown (2012) has defined as the 'holy trinity' within the literature on intersectionality: class, gender and race. The paper by Michelle Billies in this themed section engages with the concrete consequences of the adoption of austerity-led welfare reforms, combined with the affirmation of specific forms of (gay and white) homonormativity, on the lives of low income, racially and ethnically diverse LGBTGNC (gender nonconforming) subjects in New York.

In the current period, support for (or opposition to) equality on the basis of sexual orientation no longer maps neatly onto a Left/Right divide in politics. Several 'economically conservative, but socially liberal' parties of the Centre Right have promoted the extension of legal equality for sexual minorities. A case in point is the promotion of marriage equality for same-sex couples by the pro-austerity, Conservative-led Coalition under David Cameron's leadership in England and Wales. In his contribution to the section, Gavin Brown analyses the concomitant debate on 'marriage equality' and the implementation of cuts to the welfare system in Britain (highlighted by the 'Bedroom Tax') in order to show the tight connections between homonormativity and heteronormativity. He suggests that the symbolic and material inclusion of certain same-sex couples through the extension of marriage has occurred alongside the denigration of other types of families and intimate, domestic arrangements.

At the same time, the progressive incorporation of LGBT rights within the main political agenda of 'liberal' democracies is not an uncontested process. Indeed the approval of laws on equality and gay marriage - not to mention adoption - has fostered the violent opposition of ultra-conservative forces. France is one of the most emblematic cases in this respect, with Catholic and nationalist groups taking the streets with the *manif pout tous* to proclaim their opposition to the law approved by the socialist government known as *mariage pour tous* (e.g. Béraud, 2014, Ravazzolo, 2014). If we also take into account the violent attacks carried out by Catholic institutions in several countries (e.g. France, Italy) against a presumed 'gender theory' that would reverse the 'natural' order of family and education (Fillod, 2014, Garbagnoli, 2014), we see how the geographies of 'homonegativity' are much more complex than the rigid West/Eastern Europe divide often portrayed in academic and journalistic commentaries (Lottes and Alkula, 2011, van den Akker *et al.*, 2013). Indeed the mainstream hierarchy of the Catholic Church has been relatively muted in its opposition to same-sex marriage in countries such as Ireland where public opinion had clearly turned against a more conservative interpretation of marriage. In many Central and Eastern European countries - one of the regions where austerity politics was first imposed (during the post-Soviet transition, when a 'shock doctrine' was imposed to facilitate the reintroduction of capitalist markets) - the last two decades have witnessed violent opposition to any reforms concerning 'gay rights' and even to Pride demonstrations. In this context, more liberal approaches to sexual difference have been associated with 'external',

'European' values and identities which are deemed to threaten national (orthodox) values, cultures and identities (Davydova, 2012, Moss, 2014, Renkin, 2015).

Within such a complex and variegated political picture, queer scholarship has mostly focused on the critique of homonormativity, extending the application of this concept far beyond the US and Northern Europe. Against such a generalization, several scholars have addressed a geographical-based critique, stressing how the geographies of homonormativity are contextual and place-based (Browne and Bakshi, 2013, Noble, 2012). To the contrary, the queer critique to homonormativity reiterates a strong metropolitan bias, overlooking the everyday lived experiences of people outside the main metropolitan areas where this debate originated (Brown, 2009, 2012). Building on these geographical criticisms, the contribution by Cesare Di Felicianantonio challenges monolithic accounts of homonormativity by adopting the perspective of the interplay between 'neoliberalism as exception' and 'exceptions to neoliberalism' to analyse the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in Italy.

With most works focused on homonormativity and multiple forms of exclusion and privilege, less attention has been paid to how austerity and late neoliberalism impact on queer lives and politics. Indeed it is reasonable to think that the cuts to welfare systems and the deeply neoliberal reforms of housing have strong consequences on queer lives, like people with HIV/AIDS that may now experience a lack of access to treatments (as is happening in Greece), or singles that find themselves excluded from social housing because the limited remaining stocks of social housing have been prioritized for couples with children<sup>3</sup>. When exploring the impact of austerity on sexual politics and intimate life, it is important to keep discussions open, not simply focused on the experiences of those who fall under the LGBT umbrella. The current conjuncture poses several pressing questions: how is heteronormativity changing (especially amongst younger age groups)? Why are newer sex and gender identities, such as asexuality and non-binary gender forms emerging at this time?

These are crucial questions to keep in mind for this field of research, as hegemonic models of gender identity and sexual conduct continually change because of a plurality of factors, like the diffusion of new digital technologies. In this respect, age represents a main factor to take into account, as highlighted by a growing literature about the emergence of 'post-mo' and 'post-gay' identities (Brown, 2004, Ghaziani, 2011, 2014, Nash, 2013) which no longer assign a central definitional importance to sexual orientation, leading people to refuse to use labels to describe themselves and favour more sexually mixed venues. This marks a

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<sup>3</sup> The impact of the landscape of welfare as reshaped by austerity politics on different kinds of households- including singles- requires more scrutiny. Indeed we should not forget that access to marriage and adoption or alternative forms of parenthood remains deeply unequal even across the Global North, thus the impact of welfare reforms is variegated according to different legal systems.

generational divide between those who fought for equality against the stigmatization linked to the HIV/AIDS pandemic of the 1980-1990s and current young generations who do not perceive such diffuse discrimination anymore (Nash, 2013). This process has a deep impact on the configuration of urban spaces and 'gay territorialities': indeed several scholars have pointed out the dismissal of the 'gayborhood' and the concomitant diffusion of 'queer-friendly' neighborhoods (Gorman-Murray and Waitt, 2009, Brown, 2014, Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014, Reynolds, 2009).

While marking the triumph of neoliberal rationality, austerity also opens new possibilities for dissent and political subjectification; in this respect there is an urgent need to explore further the presence of queer and LGBT groups and subjects within social movements and critical formations that are contesting mainstream politics and discourses. This appears as a crucial step in order to understand how queer politics and positionalities move beyond the critique of equality politics under neoliberalism, re-configuring oppositional politics. Such a critical assessment should be addressed also towards queer politics itself, 'unveiling' the multiple forms of 'queer complicity' (Oswin, 2004), thus recognizing how queer politics has often overlooked the ways in which queer subcultures reproduce inequalities and different forms of privilege. The increasing focus on the individual, highlighted by an anti-social turn within queer scholarship (Edelman, 2004, Halberstam, 2008), has indeed led towards the progressive dismissal of social and material critique, leaving behind the collective effort of 'world-making' (Muñoz, 2009). Konstantinos Eleftheriadis' paper engages with the new political horizons opened up for queer activism by austerity politics in one of the most emblematic cases of national austerity: Greece. Working together with other social movements, queer groups have been able to adopt a variegated agenda of claims, while creating their own, autonomous space.

### **Presentation of the themed section**

This themed section seeks to question how the sexual politics of neoliberalism has altered since the global financial crisis of 2008, as neoliberalism has entered a period of austerity and intensified revanchism. In this respect, the articles composing the section are aimed at showing how national projects of sexual citizenship are not unequivocal and pre-determined along a fixed path. To this end, this themed section presents four very different national cases, each casting light on a specific aspect of the complex and multifold relationships between austerity and sexual politics. On one side we find the two countries that were the center of the crisis when it started in 2007, the US and the UK: in both cases severe austerity measures in social policies have followed the crisis, while massive support (in terms of liquidity) was granted by their national governments to financial institutions. On the other side, we find two 'peripheral' countries in terms of the financialization of the economy and exposure on global markets: Greece and Italy. Nevertheless they have been exposed to a massive debt and

financial crisis (still in progress) followed by the adoption of draconian austerity measures, especially in Greece. These policies have impacted dramatically on the welfare system and the material living conditions of people: the shutting of hospitals, the lack of basic medical treatments, and the rapid increase of suicide, being some of the most shocking consequences.

Gavin Brown analyses two recent social policy developments in the UK, 'marriage equality' and the 'Bedroom Tax' (as a main example of the changes in the welfare system), in order to show the tight connections between homonormativity and heteronormativity. While marriage equality seems to privilege specific forms of coupledom and domestic economies, the Bedroom Tax marks an attack to those singles and couples who do not conform to the normative values prompted by austerity politics in Britain.

Based on data collected through a participatory action research (PAR) project in New York, Michelle Billies' contribution sheds light on the impact of the 2007-2008 crisis on the everyday life of low income LGBTGNC subjects. Supported by increasingly homonormative discourses and practices favoring the white, multi-cultural, class-privileged gay subject, neoliberal policies tend to punish racially and ethnically diverse low-income LGBTGNC communities. However, the construction of specific spatialities for the poor, like homeless shelters, is seen to forge paradoxical constructions of freedom challenging the hegemonic individualizing neoliberal conception.

By analyzing the case of Italy (a country usually defined as 'backward' in relation to sexual politics), Cesare Di Felicianantonio's paper challenges monolithic accounts of homonormativity as a uniform process all around the Global North. Following Ong's conceptualization of the interplay between 'neoliberalism as exception' and 'exceptions to neoliberalism', the paper shows how this same interplay characterizes the sexual politics of neoliberalism and austerity in Italy. Indeed the country represents an 'exception' to the neoliberal model of sexual politics in relation to LGBT issues, while 'exception' has been invoked in the country to regulate sexuality, especially sex work.

Konstantinos Eleftheriadis analyses the discursive production developed by autonomous queer groups in Greece against the 'sexual politics of austerity' characterized by gender hierarchizations and the concomitant rising of neo-Nazi formations. Working together with several social movements arising out of the current phase of austerity politics, queer groups have been able to adopt a variegated agenda of claims, while creating their own, autonomous space challenging the imagery of the austerity-driven Nation.

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