

# Heteroactivism, Homonationalism and National Projects

**Stefanie C. Boulila**

Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Switzerland  
stefanie.boulila@hslu.ch

**Kath Browne**

University College Dublin, Ireland  
kath.browne@ucd.ie

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## Abstract

Oppositions and reactions to contestations of the hetero-patriarchal order are becoming a main site of engagement for feminist and queer activism and scholarship. Yet further spatial and intersectional attention to these oppositions, dubbed “anti-gender politics”, is needed to move beyond single-issue analyses of their geographical ‘placings’. This special issue seeks to develop geographical analyses of such contestations by situating them within nationalisms and racial politics. The papers in this special issue develop the concept of heteroactivism to deliver conceptual and empirical insights into the spatialities of oppositions and resistances against gender and sexual equalities that are manifest as part of broader racial and national projects.

## Keywords

Anti-gender, gender, sexuality, LGBT, feminism, queer

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## Introduction

Oppositions against gender and sexual equalities and reactionary attempts at restoring the hetero-patriarchal order have been at the forefront of many feminist and queer academic debates. Often framed through the language of a 'backlash', political attempts at undoing hard-fought-for rights, curtailing equality bodies or gender studies departments and criminalising actors who push for transformative politics are subsumed under the label "anti-gender" politics (Browne and Nash 2017; Nash and Browne 2020). A recurring question in academic literature circles back to the amplified role of gender within the ascent of reactionary politics. With the pressing issues at stake and imminent attacks on women's reproductive rights, the safety of LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual plus) minorities and concerted campaigns against gender studies have prompted academic responses outside of geographies. However, the emerging field has created its own silences. The spatialities and intersectional nature of oppositions to gender and sexual justice have so far remained underdeveloped in scholarship exploring so-called "anti-gender" politics, which are often presented as single-issue politics.

This special issue aims to begin to address these gaps by examining the convergence between contestations of gender and sexual equalities with nationalisms and racial politics. The contributions in this issue refuse the common-sense North/South and East/West binaries that are mobilised when LGBTQIA+ rights are discussed transnationally (Mizelińska and Kulpa 2011; Kulpa and Silva 2016; Banerjea and Browne 2023). Instead, they use the recursive constitution of 'place', which can be epitomised through the nation in relation to resistances to sexual and gender rights. Complicating any 'natural' scales or associations, they reveal the scalar tensions between various locales, regional and global 'placings'. This allows for a nuanced discussion of the role of the nation, including its racial underpinnings, for resistances against gender and sexual equalities. The special issue moves away from frequently advanced presumptions that the achievement of gender equality and LGBT rights is a natural effect of democratic politics of the Global North/West (Kulpa and Silva 2016). Critical engagements with contexts in the Global North/West demonstrate that those who oppose gender and sexual equalities are required to mobilise heteronormativity in ways that require constant work through symbolic and material practices. By refusing hierarchies and narratives about these global binaries, we offer critical geographers a spatial and transnational lens into the manifestations of political struggles for heteronormativity and against sexual justice.

This special issue brings together scholars at various career stages who offer new ways of thinking about reactionary sexual and gender politics and geographies by working beyond current modes of conceptualising these resistances. Our authors draw on case studies from Ukraine, Sweden, the United States, Hungary, and Israel, as well as their transnational connections. The contributions explicitly examine the intersections of contemporary hetero-patriarchal politics with nationalisms and racial politics. In this, they speak to the ongoing challenges and contestations of sexual and gender rights, equalities and lives across the globe.

This editorial will first introduce the central pillars of this special issue and then move to outline the papers.

### **Heteronormativity in the Post-homophobic Nation**

Feminist theorists have long highlighted the centrality of gender and sexual relations for national projects. Feminist political geographical discussions have illustrated the gendered creation of nationalisms and national identities through male protectors and 'fathers' of the nation and female 'mothers' (Sharp 1996; Browne et al. 2018; Miltz 2020). All exist in heterosexual relation to each other, where the heterosexual nuclear family is often definitional of the state. Roles such as mother can be enshrined into constitutions, as is the case in Ireland, where the current Irish Constitution, ratified in 1937, still places women in the home for the 'common good'. Geographers have noted how nations and sexualities/genders are shaped through the performance and idealisation of heteronormative forms (Sharp 1996; Yuval-Davis 1997; Binnie and Bell 2000). Heteronormativity moves beyond sexuality to encompass the normalisations of sex/gender within binary frames of heterosexualities as feminist theories have demonstrated, most notably in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Adriene Rich's *Compulsory Heterosexuality* (1983). As an analytic, heteronormativity points to the creation and celebration of specific family forms that, despite their cultural specificity and shaped by white, ableist and middle-class norms, claim a universality. The nuclear family is typified by an intelligible heterosexual, monogamous couple and their children, connected by life-long bonds that are assumed to be 'natural' through 'biological connectivities'. However, family forms are not universal. They emerge and travel differently in different places, creating idealised figures which are both celebrated and impossible to attain, therefore, require constant maintenance, engagement, and reiteration. Geographers have long contended that the creation and reiteration of heteronormativities are not only place-based but create place/spaces in which we live, which recreate bodies, identities, and lives through these spatial relationalities (Bell and Valentine 1995; Brown and Browne 2016).

As feminist and queer geographers have long engaged with how heteronormativities become through nationalistic visions of gendered and sexualised norms and subjectivities (e.g., Sharp 1996), more recent debates have investigated when and how gay and lesbian subjects are incorporated into national imaginaries. In Lisa Duggan's (2002) exploration of the cultural politics of US American neoliberalism, homonormativity emerged as a means to render visible how assimilatory gay and lesbian politics can have a conservative effect in how they reproduce heteronormative institutions such as marriage. Geographers have engaged with these concepts, calling for more considerations of the spatialities of normalisations as well as the knowledge production in this area (Brown 2009; Di Feliciano 2015; 2019). Moreover, Jasbir Puar's (2007) influential notion of homonationalism has advanced our understanding of the racial dimensions that render some homosexual subjects assimilable. Scholars following Puar's anti-racist contentions have demonstrated how the co-option and use of lesbian and gay inclusion, in the form of liberal rights such as civil unions or hate crime legislation, reproduce national projects, affirm racial hierarchies (Puar 2007; Haritaworn 2010; El-Tayeb

2011), engage in postcolonial military conflict (Puar 2007) and thus reproduce neo-colonial understandings of global progress (Puar 2002; Rao 2014a; 2014b; Browne et al. 2015).

During the past two decades, homophobia in the global North has become increasingly racialised. The construction of Lesbian, Gay, and Bi rights as a single-issue dimension in the quest for liberal rights has glossed over the ways in which struggles for sexual equalities have obfuscated racial inequalities (Haritaworn et al. 2008; Petzen 2012). However, the racialisation of homophobia has not only been enabled by homonationalist formations but also by a separation of homophobia from heteronormativity through a narrow focus on extreme forms of state-sponsored and interpersonal violence (Boulila 2019). Homophobia, only intelligible through severe forms of violence, has become an aberration from the liberal democratic norm. The racialisation of homophobia has facilitated some nations in the Global North/West to become imagined as beyond the violence of homophobia, as post-homophobic, while heteronormativities remain unexamined (ibid.). These broader shifts in the discursive construction of homophobia and their spatial effects become particularly relevant when we examine new forms of resistance to the recently adopted sexual and gender equalities.

### **Beyond Anti-gender: Understanding Heteroactivist Resistances**

Heteroactivism names resistances to sexual and gender equalities that are emerging in this changed discursive terrain. It focuses on how heteronormativities are reiterated and recreated, including through challenging sexual and gender equalities in place (Nash and Browne 2020). So far, analyses of heteroactivism have focused on Ireland, the UK and Canada. These are contexts where sexual and gender equalities and rights have, until recently, been developed and extended since the turn of the century. With homophobia increasingly referring to extreme acts of violence, it has been clear that the labels 'homophobic' or 'anti-gay' are increasingly insufficient to name resistances where heterosexualities have been sought and reiterated in contrast to increasing societal, legal and cultural changes, (and to a point) gendered norms (Browne and Nash 2017). Heteroactivism thus conceptualises the ways in which resistances to sexual and gender rights, equalities and inclusions are emerging in disassociation from homophobia.

The concept of heteroactivism was developed in parallel to the engagements with so-called "anti-gender" social movements in political science and sociology. These studies have taken specific national lenses to explore both the national manifestations of these movements and their international "diffusion" (Hark and Villa 2015; Mayer and Sauer 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). Studies of "anti-gender" mobilisations have mapped and traced recent challenges to gender and sexual equalities, focusing on groups seen as 'far-right' (often undefined) and those directly creating anti-LGBT legislation/conditions. These overt phenomena are traced through parliaments, protests and other public events/processes. However, by using the term "anti-gender" or "gender ideologies", critics reproduce the terms used by those they seek to study. This includes but is not limited to, those who oppose displays of gender/sexualities that are deemed 'anti-family' (the heterosexual nuclear family) and/or contest what is termed 'gender ideology' in favour of

the 'naturalness' of biological sex (Hark and Villa 2015; Graff and Korolczuk 2022). In reproducing the terms of the analytic object, these studies can struggle to move beyond a binary vision of those who are for gender and sexual equalities (and therefore beyond homophobia and sexism) and 'far-right' reactionaries (who identify as being against gender). In this way, the term anti-gender, as an analytic, has been limited, often focusing on naming and categorising lists of positions of 'far-right' political origin and tactics. It is, however, important to recognise that nationalisms and their associated gender and racial politics are not just reproduced by the 'far-right' but also by liberal actors and the so-called 'political mainstream' (Boulila 2019; Mondon and Winter 2020).

Heteroactivism foregrounds that the spatially specific manifestations of resistances cannot be understood as fixed and uniform. Instead, they are more clearly understood as being created and or becoming displayed in particular contexts and within transnational networks and framings, i.e., they are inherently geographical (Nash and Browne 2020). For example, Browne et al. (2018) explored how (white, middle-class) Irishness was centralised through appeals to 'vote no' in the Irish 2015 same-sex marriage referendum. Framed through a specifically 'Irish' caring for the child, through a need for 'a mother', 'vote no' mobilised national care/love that was contingent on white, 'middle Ireland' heterosexuality. Heteroactivism has the potential to render visible investments in hetero- and cis-normativities where they occur beyond supposed ubiquitous 'far-right' origins. Moreover, on a conceptual level, heteroactivism refuses presumptions of direct relationships between 'far-right' and heteroactivist oppositions and thus a binary between the 'far-right' and liberal mainstream in where oppositions can emerge. It, therefore, holds the potential to open a space to examine phenomena of homonationalisms and associated racialisations alongside oppositions to equalities, both relationally as well as in their heterogeneity in place.

In view of the intersectional challenges that resistances against gender and sexual equalities pose, this special issue seeks to explore the multifarious intersections of heteroactivism, nationalist and racialised projects in multiple national contexts. Within this special issue, papers explore the various convergences of heteroactivism with (homo-)nationalisms and/or racial politics. They extend considerations of sexual and gendered landscapes across Ukraine, Sweden, the United States, Hungary, and Israel. In this way, they incorporate less studied contexts in sexualities/queer geographies, particularly in English-language journals. Thus, the special issue authors create diverse and diffuse sexual (and gendered) geographies, beyond the familiar Anglo-American hegemonies, that engage with resistances to sexual and gender equalities and ideological investments in heteronormativities. In doing so, they offer new insights and theorisations that are of pressing importance in our contemporary worlds, pushing the boundaries of geographical investigations and debates while demonstrating the centrality of place, space and scale to engaging with sexual justice.

Exploring the post-Soviet space of Ukraine, Maryna Shevtsova's paper *Resisting "Liberal Values": The Intersection of Gender, Religion, and Sexuality in Ukrainian Heteroactivism* invites consideration of how women create heteroactivist arguments.

Considering the gendering of heteroactivist narratives and contentions, this paper demonstrates how these are spatially re-constituted through specific temporalities that differ from responses to 'fast-paced', 'Western' sexual and gendered changes. Examining heteronormative, or perhaps heteroactivist, femininities in Ukraine, Shevtsova explores how being between the 'progressive' EU and the 'traditional family values' of Russia offers new insights into the travelling and reconfiguring of heteroactivism through specifically gendered forms. Seeking to not align themselves with Russia or the EU, heteroactivisms in this context are re-constituted through Ukraine's unique geopolitical spatialities. Shevtsova notes how female heteroactivists seek to promote the ideal of a 'healthy family' as only heteronormative aligning with traditional Russian values but claiming nationhood to keep distant from these. They do so through localised discourses of motherhood and nation in the need for normative masculine men to protect white Ukrainian women rather than feminists and women's rights. Shevtsova demonstrates how Orthodox Christianity continues to form a crucial part of Ukrainian national histories and mythologies, painting those marching for women's rights as 'Ukraine-phobic' by linking religion, Ukraine, and heteronormativity as inseparable and mutually formative as they re-constitute 'responsible' citizens that build nations and preserve (heteronormative) culture.

Mia Liinason's article entitled *The Loved Home' and other Exclusionary Care Discourses. A Multi-scalar and Transnational Analysis of Heteroactivist Resistances to Gender and Sexual Rights in Sweden* offers a scalar exploration of heteroactivist manifestations in Sweden (a context associated with long-standing gender/sexual equalities). Moving across the local, national and transnational, it offers a critical investigation of the gender-sexuality-state-nation nexus. It does so by exploring the sexual and gendered normalisations of "home" understood through neoliberal nationalism, family and Western civilisation. Expanding heteroactivism by considering these normalisations and how they manifest through key institutional actors in Sweden, Liinason focuses on exclusionary discourses of love and care, created through the reconstitution of the idealised figure of the home. Recognising alliances across a range of actors, she refutes simplistic notions of resistances to sexual/gender equalities, demonstrating the role of neoliberal nationalism in the contestation of these rights. In this way, Liinason's article speaks to ongoing challenges around gender/sexualities that challenge national imaginings that understand Sweden and others as 'advanced' in terms of equalities and inclusions.

In *Fertile Ground: The Biopolitics of Natalist Populism*, Claire Rasmussen highlights the role of populism in right-wing heteroactivist movements. Rejecting those analyses framing populism as fixed and/or inherently deficient, Rasmussen argues that heteroactivism informs how 'the people' (as the imagined universal) are constituted and pitted against an 'elite' that has put the traditional family under siege. The rhetoric of democratic crisis enables right-wing populists to evoke an urgency within national spaces and a turn back to nativist nationalism to defend the family against a liberal elite. Rasmussen explores nativist nationalism in its transnational relationality, including examples from Brazil, Hungary and the United States. The

author illustrates how reactionary heteroactivist movements seek to preserve the future of the nation through biological kinship and allegorical values. The imagined enemy is a transnational liberal hegemony, epitomised by what reactionaries call “gender ideology”, in this instance as a metaphor for feminist critiques of sex differences and heteronormativity. In challenging hetero-patriarchy and their representatives, transnational institutions such as the EU or NGOs are imagined to colonise and suppress the family’s potency to reproduce the ‘native stock’ through immigration.

Julia Lagerman examines how heteroactivism is entangled with race and nationalism in the context of Swedish neo-nazism, notably the case of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). In *Neo-Nazi Heteroactivism and the Swedish Nationalist Contradiction*, Lagerman argues that gender relations are seen as an essential means to securing a white, racially pure nation. Although violent in their strategies, the NRM curate a heteroactivist shell to repel accusations of homophobia in a context where national identity is tied to liberal norms in relation to gender and sexuality. Lagerman argues that the NRM’s nationalism clashes with the majoritarian liberal nationalism that constructs Swedish exceptionalism around LGBTQI-friendliness. However, in national imaginaries that construct Sweden without homophobia, the NRM is deemed trivial as homophobia remains tied to suburban spaces and its poor and racialised residents.

In *New Skin for an Old Ceremony - The Gay Revolution and the Formation of Israeli Heteroactivism*, Leehee Rothschild examines the emergence of Israeli heteroactivism through an ethnography of oppositions to two academic queer studies conferences at Bar Ilan University in 2019, an institution historically associated with religious Zionism. Although the move towards homonationalism made LGBT rights appeal to a broad political spectrum, heteroactivists situate the heteronormative Jewish family as the foundation of the Israeli state and society in a context where state and religion are not fully separated. Rothschild argues that Israeli heteroactivism is closely intertwined with religious Zionism, as narratives draw on familial discourses and religious sentiments associated with existential fears of religious and national destructions by foreign actors.

Overall, this special issue offers new directions for thinking through the oppositions that inform contemporary sexual and gendered politics transnationally by explicitly theorising them within racial politics and associated nationalisms. We hope to show that resistances against gender and sexual equalities are inherently geographical in their manifestations, relationalities and political possibilities. They refuse simple understandings of diffusion or North/South and East/West binaries, demonstrating that transnational expressions of heteronormativities require ongoing engagements and critique. There is more to be done, and centralising geographies as a key analytic will be critical in understanding contemporary and historical sexual and gendered political, cultural and social landscapes. We hope this special issue speaks both to geographers and to those who (or have yet to) recognise the import of the spatial in engaging with resistances, contestations and heteronormative hegemonies.

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