QUEER MOVEMENT

Introduction

Queer activism is distinct from lesbian and gay activism as a result of its celebration of difference and challenge to normative social relations. This chapter examines the emergence, development and diffusion of queer social movements since the late 1980s. It takes a sense of movement seriously, not only studying queer as a social movement, but tracing the movement of the concept of ‘queer’ activism across time and space from its development in the metropolitan centres of North America. From its origins in the AIDS direct action activism of ACT UP (New York) in the 1980s, to queer anarchist gatherings in Europe in the 2000s, queer has sought to challenge and question regimes of the normal. This chapter cannot offer a comprehensive history and analysis of all self-proclaimed queer activism around the world over the last quarter of a century; but, what it attempts to do is chart and critique key moments in that history. It also considers how queer activism and academic queer theory have related to each other in different periods and in different places. From the very beginning, the development of Queer Theory was entangled with the new breed of queer activism. There were direct overlaps in personnel between the graduate students and early career academics developing queer theoretical approaches and those strategizing and participating in queer direct action on the streets. Queer Theory was rooted in this broader radical project of contesting heteronormative social relations. In the intervening two decades, the relationship between Queer Theory and radical street-based activism has become more tenuous and more strained, but has never been entirely broken. Queer activism has, of course, also changed significantly in this period; and, as the concept has travelled, has been adapted to new circumstances.

This chapter begins with a short section exploring queer’s political values. It then examines the initial development of queer activist praxis in North America at the end of the 1980s. Queer activism emerged out of the AIDS direct action campaigns of ACT UP, building on their tactical repertoire, but focusing attention on violence against sexual minorities and other
expressions of heteronormative privilege. My focus then shifts to what I consider the second incarnation of queer activism that emerged in the late 1990s and developed further in the early 2000s. In this period, queer activism (both in North America and internationally) developed close links with the emerging alter-globalization and global justice movement of movements (Shepard and Hayduk 2002). At this time, anti-authoritarian and anarchist ideas and practices became more central to much radical queer activism and to the development of queer activist praxis. I suggest that it was in this period that queer activist praxis really moved beyond the Anglophone world. In the third section of the chapter, I offer a brief analysis of queer activism in Israel/Palestine, and Central and Eastern Europe, demonstrating how queer forms of political critique and organising were adapted to and redeployed in these specific contexts. Having charted the moment of queer activist ideas and practices over the last twenty-five years, I conclude by considering queer activism’s limitations and questioning what potential queer activism has in the current conjuncture.

**Queer political values**

‘Queer’ is a notoriously slippery term that resists precise definitions. There are, nonetheless, a number of core values that are shared, in different combinations, and with different emphases, by queer political movements. From the beginning, queer political activism developed in dialogue with queer theorising, which emerged in parallel to it in the late 1980s. Queer activism took seriously queer theory’s postmodern, post-structuralist and social constructionist approaches to sexual and gender identity and attempted to operationalize these in political praxis (Bell and Binnie 2000: 37).

Initially, in the early actions of Queer Nation, a key political value of the emerging queer movement was a commitment to safety and visibility in public for sexual minorities on their own terms. This was counterposed to a growing tendency amongst more mainstream lesbian and gay political movements in the United States to demand a right to privacy. Queer political movements have frequently sought to confront and undermine the reproduction of heterosexual social norms in public space, rather than retreat from them. While lesbian and gay activists mobilize and campaign for the extension of legal rights and ‘equality’ for sexual minorities, queer activists have frequently more been interested in claiming a right to difference and a right to the city (Brown 2011).
It could be argued that queer political movements tend to be ‘sex positive’ in their celebration and defence of (public) sexual cultures (Dangerous Bedfellows 1996). This is often the case, but not universally so. It should be noted that several of the most prominent activists involved in ACT UP and the formation of Queer Nation, such as Larry Kramer and Michael Signorile, were sexually conservative and critical of gay men’s public sex cultures. It is important to remember this and to recognise that queer political movements are not singular, unified or without contradictions.

Like queer theorists, queer activists attempt to dissolve strong boundaries around sexual and gender identities, and to challenge taken for granted binaries (for example, man/woman; gay/straight). In the early days of queer activism, this was a pragmatic move as much as it was a question of political values. In response to the urgency and perceived enormity of the political crisis surrounding the AIDS pandemic, ACT UP briefly reunited lesbians and gay men after a period of social and political separatism. ACT UP set a precedent for queer movements by attempting to forge and expand political alliances beyond and across identity categories. In its attempts to resist and subvert normative identities, queer activism presents sexual identity as a choice (not innate) and celebrates the fluidity of gender and sexuality. This fosters a sense of multiplicity and queer diversity; but, these coalitions have frequently fragmented into their constituent affinity groups once the immediate unifying cause has subsided. This raises another of queer’s contradictions: despite queer activism’s suspicion of rights claims based on bounded identity categories, queer political movements have played a part in accelerating the articulation of rights claims based on trans, bisexual and asexual identities over the last two decades.

Queer politics has ambiguous relationship to demands for sexual ‘liberation’. In part, after Foucault (1978) and others, this stems from an acknowledgement that there is no ‘natural’ sexuality to be liberated. And yet, at the same time, it is possible to discern nostalgia within some queer activist projects for some of the utopianism of 1970s’ gay liberation movements and their critique of the family and other capitalist institutions (Shepard and Hayduk 2002). As I outline below, as the 1990s progressed, some strands of queer activism adopted a more anti-capitalist critique. Here too, we find a contradiction in queer activism’s political values. Queer political movements have tended to have an ambiguous relationship to the (lesbian and) gay bar scene and other sites of gay consumption. At times, their potential to disrupt heteronormative social values has led these sites to be celebrated and defended (Dangerous Bedfellows 1996); whilst increasingly in North America and Western Europe such sites have
also been dismissed by queer activists for their complicity in the (re)production of new homonormative social relations (Duggan 2002). Throughout the rest of this chapter, I explore how these political values (and the debates surrounding them) have developed and travelled since the emergence of queer activism in the late 1980s.

**Queer origins**

Queer activism initially arose in very specific political circumstances surrounding the handling of the AIDS crisis in the USA and the concurrent rise of anti-gay prejudice at the time. Queer Nation developed out of ACT UP New York’s direct action to counter the AIDS crisis. Although early queer activism frequently sought to challenge the invisibility and marginality of gender and sexual minorities, it also sought to question the dominant expressions of (sexual) identity politics at the time. This initial queer activism promised comprehensive resistance to regimes of the normal as an alternative to identity-based politics of representation (Brown 2007a; Warner 1999).

Despite the freshness and excitement that surrounded Queer Nation at the time, I do not believe that queer represented a complete epistemic break from earlier gay activism. While it stood in contrast to the political visions of mainstream lesbian and gay advocacy groups in the United States; tactically and politically, it owed much to the fading legacy of earlier gay liberation movements. If gay identity politics had become mired in an essentialist approach that treated sexuality like an ethnicity in how it mobilized and justified its rights claims; queer offered a postmodern and post-structuralist critique. Like some strands of early liberation politics, it recognised the fluidity of sexuality and identity, and sought to articulate a post-identity sexual politics. In this mode, as Seidman (1993: 111) has recognised, it drew “its power more from critical force than any positive programme for change”.

ACT UP burst onto the political scene in 1987 as “a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (Crimp with Rolston 1990: 13). It challenged discrimination against people with HIV and demanded access to medical trials and emerging treatment options. In addressing these issues, ACT UP was never solely focused on issues of health or sexuality. Shepard and Hayduk (2002: 1) remind their readers that ACT UP’s first action took place on Wall Street against ‘business, big business, business as usual!!!!’ Queer Nation was founded at an ACT UP (New York) meeting, three years later, in April 1990. The art historian and cultural theorist Douglas Crimp, who was an ACT
UP activist at the time (and whose postmodern theories, applied in this context, are thought to have influenced the development of Queer Theory), described how Queer Nation came about in the following terms:

“Overburdened by the battles AIDS required us to take on, ACT UP couldn’t fight the homophobia anymore. That, too, was a full-time struggle, a struggle taken on by the newly formed Queer Nation. I don’t want to oversimplify this capsule history. Queer Nation didn’t take either the queers or the queerness out of ACT UP. But it made possible, at least symbolically, a shift of our attention to the nonqueer, or the more-than-queer, problems of AIDS.” (Crimp 1993: 316)

Queer Nation aimed to expand the counterpublic spaces ACT UP had created in relation to AIDS activism to transform broader public discourses around sexuality. Building on ACT UP’s collaboration with the graphic arts collective Gran Fury, Queer Nation made use of striking visual material to transform New York’s public spaces “into a zone of political pedagogy” (Berlant and Freeman 1993: 198). It sought to transform urban space so that sexual and gender minorities might feel safe not just in ‘gay’ neighbourhoods, but all the places they moved through and inhabited in their everyday lives. Berlant and Freeman (1993: 199) suggest one of the paradoxes of Queer Nation was the way in which it exploited internal difference:

“Queer Nation understands the propriety of queerness to be a function of the diverse spaces in which it aims to become explicit. It names multiple local and national publics; it does not look for a theoretical coherence to regulate in advance all of its tactics: all politics in the Queer Nation are imagined on the street. Finally, it always refuses closeting strategies of assimilation and goes for the broadest and most explicit assertion of presence.”

In many ways, this appreciation of Queer Nation’s commitment to difference and multiple queer publics anticipates later anti-homonormative activism that challenged homogenised ‘sameness’ (with straight society) over ‘difference’.

An early public articulation of queer politics was the *Queers Read This* polemic distributed at gay pride parades in New York and Chicago during the summer of 1990. Berlant and Freeman (1993: 200) describe this as a manifesto of the politics of rage and a “slave narrative without decorum”. It exclaims,
I have friends. Some of them are straight. Year after year, I see my straight friends. I want to see them, to see how they are doing… [and] year after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to them and that I am only half listened to.

BASH BACK… LET YOURSELF BE ANGRY…

Being queer is not about a right to privacy: it is about the freedom to be public… It is not about the mainstream profit-margins, patriotism, patriarchy or being assimilated… Being queer is ‘grass roots’ because we know that everyone of us, every body, every cunt, every heart and ass and dick is a world of pleasure waiting to be explored.

Everyone of us is a world of infinite possibilities. (Anon 1990: 10 - 11)

This angry statement drew attention to the way both ‘straight’ society and gay advocates of assimilation into normative society tend to erase the ‘infinite possibilities’ of queer sexual and gender difference. Around the same time, Homocult started issuing similarly worded communiques and flyposting inflammatory Situationist-inspired posters in Manchester, England (and later at London Pride). If there was a similar antagonistic call to action contained in the work of Homocult, their statements also contained a more obvious class politics (that seemed to owe some inspiration to the humour of the contemporary British anarchist tabloid Class War).

Queer Nation, and its imitators both in the USA and elsewhere, drew on a broader range of inspirations from the radical left, feminist and (specifically in the US context) the civil rights movement. The inspiration from social movements that proclaimed that the personal is political, in the late 1960s and 1970s, was reworked for postmodern times and the growing prominence of mass media. Drawing on ACT UP’s direct action tactics, Queer Nation’s affinity groups staged spectacular (and often visually startling) direct actions that attempted to challenge homophobic public policy and heteronormative assumptions about public space. These actions were frequently infused with a camp ethic, but could combine both “menace and merriment” (Berlant and Freeman 1993: 205). As is implied in the very name Queer Nation, the group sought to reclaim urban space from the threat of danger of violence to sexual minorities and reterritorialize that space. This approach can be seen in actions such as same-sex kiss-ins in sports bars, or actions by the Suburban Homosexual Outreach Program (SHOP) that made queer presence visible in suburban shopping malls. Berlant and Freeman (1993: 208) argue that Queer Nation was not necessarily against queer consumerism but
made “consumer pleasure central to the transformation of public culture, thus linking the utopian promises of the commodity with those of the nation.” Such actions were not just about creating visibility in public space, though; they were also about challenging taken-for-granted forms of knowledge about sexual minorities.

“Queer Nation in its strongest tactical moments, as when it exploits the symbolic designs of mass and national culture in order to dismantle the standardizing apparatus that organizes all manner of sexual practice into ‘facts’ of sexual identity, as when it mobilizes a radically wide range of knowledge – modes of understanding from science to gossip – to reconstitute ‘information’ about queerness, thus transforming the range of reference ‘queer’ has by multiplying its specifications.” (Berlant and Freeman 1993: 196)

When ACT UP was first formed in New York, the concept caught on and ACT UP chapters quickly proliferated in major cities across North America. There was a diffusion of the ACT UP ‘brand’ around the world, with ACT UP groups forming in Berlin, London, Paris and Sydney amongst other locations. Three years later, the concept of queer activism also moved quickly around the (Anglophone) world – 1990 also saw the formation of the British lesbian and gay direct action group Outrage!, which emerged out of ACT UP (London) in response, initially, to the murders of a number of gay men in London, and increased police surveillance of gay cruising sites. In this British context, Outrage! drew not only on the experience of ACT UP, but on the use of direct action by gay activists in response to the Thatcher government’s implementation of Section 28 of the Local Government Act (1988) which prohibited the use of public funds to ‘intentionally promote’ homosexuality (Cooper 1993; Bell and Binnie 2000: 44). I would note, however, that ACT UP was not the only inspiration for direct action against Section 28, as many of these actions were directly entangled with and inspired by the ‘queer feminisms’ of Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp (Roseneil 2000: vii). In both London and New York, 1992 saw the women leave to form the Lesbian Avengers, as a response to male-domination of the agendas and workings of supposedly mixed groups like Queer Nation and Outrage! (Sommella with Shulman 1997; Shepard with Shulman 2002).

Early queer activist groups like Queer Nation were important for shifting the terms of debate around sexual difference, challenging a rights-based agenda that desired sameness with heterosexuals, and drawing attention to the habitual violence experienced by sexual and gender minorities. Although their tactics of non-violent direct action appeared radical, the
politics that underpinned them were at times more complex and contradictory. There was always a danger that in employing transgressive tactics to expose the ubiquity of heterosexual privilege, these groups actually served to draw attention to and, ultimately, reinforce the homo/hetero binary (rather than undermining it, as their queer project aspired to do). For all of their post-identity rhetoric, there is little evidence that their actions significantly addressed the needs of sexual minorities other than lesbians and gay men (and, as the tensions that led to the creation of the Lesbian Avengers show, often little more than the needs of gay men).

**Queer in the ‘movement of movements’**

The challenge in writing any overview of queer activist movements over the last quarter of a century is to resist telling simplistically linear narratives. In the mid-1990s and into the 2000s, queer activism diversified, took on new challenges and made new alliances with broader activist networks. In the first instance, this brought specifically queer issues to anti-gentrification alliances in major North American cities. Later, some radical queer activists understood their endeavours as part of the global alter-globalization ‘movement of movements’ and, in some cases, specifically the anti-capitalist and anarchist strands of that global movement (Portwood-Stacer 2010; Ritchie 2008).

In 1997, SexPanic! mobilized to “protect public sexual culture and safer sex in New York from police crackdowns, public stigma, and morality crusades” (SexPanic! Mission Statement cited in Shepard 2002: 202). Amongst other actions, SexPanic! held ‘queer-ins’ in Central Park’s Rambles, shining torches into the bushes to ‘expose’ any undercover cops ‘loitering’ there. In these actions, they utilized humour, parody and street theatre to make the police actions seem absurd. They adapted an old Queer Nation chant, instead of ‘shopping’ they loudly proclaimed “We’re here, we’re queer, we’re fucking in the park” (Shepard 2002: 207). Later, they contested new planning and zoning regulations that significantly curtailed where adult venues could operate. In this way, SexPanic! expanded beyond a group defending queer public sexual cultures to contest the ‘Disneyfication’ of Times Square and made alliances with broader anti-gentrification campaigns. In doing so, they were aware of the complicity of some mainstream gay commentators and politicians in helping to further the revanchist gentrification agenda of urban social cleansing. At the time, similar issues were being raised on the other side of the USA too, as Mattilda (2004a: 4) attests:
“What is sad about the Castro (and similar gay ghettos across the country and the world), and indicative of what gay people do with even a little bit of power, is that these same smiling gay men have failed to build community for queers (or anyone) outside their social group. Many gay men (even in the Castro) still remain on the fringes, either by choice or lack of opportunity. But as the most ‘successful’ gays (and their allies) have moved from outsider status to insider clout, they have consistently fought misogynist, racist, classist, and ageist battles to ensure that their neighbourhood remain a community only for the rich, male, and white (or at least those who pass). They’ve succeeded in clamping down on the defiance, anger, flamboyance, and subversion, once thriving in gay subcultures, in order to promote a vapid consume-or-die, we’re just like you mentality.”

Mattilda’s (2004a: 5) point was that, if early queer activism had organised against homophobic violence, it was now time to organise against the symbolic and material violence of gay assimilation. One activist response to the growing conservatism of affluent gays, growing out of the contemporary movements against gentrification and the crackdowns on public sex venues, was Gay Shame. Gay Shame was first held in June 1998 at a collective living/performance space in Brooklyn – dumba. Several hundred people attended the event that consisted of performances, speeches, dancing and free vegan food. Although not specifically an anarchist movement, many in the Gay Shame milieu had anarchist leanings and this would influence subsequent developments in its actions. Out of that first event, a pamphlet was produced called Swallow your Pride: a do-it-yourself guide to hands-on activism that covered practical skill-sharing for forms of self-organised direct action politics. A year later, there was a Gay Shame in Toronto, another followed in Sweden, and the concept was brought to San Francisco in 2001 (Mattilda 2004b: 238-9), where it increasingly focused on the corporate sponsorship of gay pride events, and gay gentrification. The first San Francisco Gay Shame event described itself as a “queer autonomous space” (Brown 2007a) and was a conscious attempt to claim public space in the city for resistant queer culture. For Mattilda (2004b: 239), a key organiser, it was an opportunity “to help build something transformative, deviant, and dangerous out of alienation and desperation”. In 2002 San Francisco Gay Shame initiated the Gay Shame Awards in categories including ‘Exploiting our youth’, ‘Helping Right-wingers Cope’ (a jibe at the more mainstream gay organisation the Human Rights Campaign), and ‘Best Racist-ass White-only space’.
At the same time that Gay Shame was first being organised in New York, a queer gathering with a similar ethos was being held in London. The impulse for what became the first Queeruption gathering emerged from a group of queer anarchists who had been involved with the work of a squatted social centre in an ethnically diverse and rapidly gentrifying area of south London in the preceding period. The initial Queeruption took place at that social centre in late September 1998. A year later, a second international Queeruption gathering took place in New York (at dumba, where Gay Shame had been held two years previously). From 2001 until 2007, gatherings took place more or less annually (in San Francisco, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, Sydney, Barcelona, Tel Aviv and Vancouver) (Brown 2007a, 2007b; Vanelslander 2007).

In his reflections on the successes and failures of the second Queeruption in New York in 1989, Jesse Heiwa (2004: 275) acknowledged that “to many participants, whether the gathering was predominantly white was less of an issue to folks than whether the food was vegan”. Here we get a glimpse of the biopolitics of food in queer (and anarchist) scenes – ethical concerns over food came to displace troubling questions of white privilege and a complex politics of class and social mobility.

The second London Queeruption gathering was housed in a squatted tenement block in a predominantly working-class area of east London in March 2002. The publicity for the five-day event promised that it would provide space for “forging anti-commercial queer community” and “building alternatives and living our dreams” (Queeruption London, 2003: 7; cited in Brown 2007a: 2693). This free gathering attracted nearly 500 people, with a third of them living collectively on the premises for the week. In addition to accommodation, the building (again) contained a vegan cafe and space for countless political discussions and skill-sharing educational workshops. The evenings were filled with amateur entertainment with a queer, punk ethos. For one participant, the best aspect of the gathering was that it provided space for “nudity, naughtiness, nourishment [and] non-conformity” (Brown 2007a: 2693). Like several of the other Queeruption gatherings culminated in a sex party; after the Amsterdam gathering two years later, queers of colour questioned the growing assumption that engaging in a public sex was in itself definitional of being a ‘radical queer’. They highlighted that one could have very different sexual ethics and still be opposed to the exclusionary politics of homonormative lesbian and gay culture. Equally, they highlighted that, in the context of the ‘War on Terror’, many queers of colour had more immediate
political priorities than building countercultural, prefigurative queer autonomous spaces (Haritaworn 2008; Race Revolt n.d.; Tauqir et al 2010).

Since the early 2000s, there has been a growth in the visibility of both queer of colour organising and trans activism (Spade 2004). In New York in 2000, Stonewall riot veteran, Sylvia Rivera resurrected the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) to demand justice for Amanda Milan, a trans woman who had been murdered shortly before the Manhattan Pride parade that June. Since 2003, Queers for Economic Justice have been organising in New York to defend the interests of poor queers and against systems of economic injustice that impact on poor queer communities. Increasingly queers of colour and their allies have challenged how a ‘gay rights’ agenda has been incorporated into geopolitical debates through the development of ‘homonationalist’ policies that seek to align lesbian and gay communities in the West with the ‘national interests’ of the USA and its allies in their imperialist interventions in Africa, Asia and the Middle East (Jindal 2004; Puar 2007). This important activism and political critique responds to shifting ‘regimes of the normal’ as certain expressions of lesbian and gay life have moved into the mainstream of society as a result of changing social attitudes and limited legal ‘equality’.

Queers movement(s)

Queer activism originated in the USA, but it was taken up and adapted very quickly in other national contexts, not just in the Anglophone world. In the late 1980s, ACT UP groups were formed in Berlin and Paris, for example [see Broqua, this volume]; but, it is from the late 1990s onwards that queer activism really became a global phenomenon. The Queeruption gatherings described earlier drew in participants from many parts of Europe and beyond, some were individuals, but many participants came from activists collectives in their home locations. In this section, I examine the different trajectories that the concept of queer politics has followed as it has travelled across national and linguistic borders. I focus on examples from Israel/Palestine and Serbia. In doing so, I attempt to disrupt simplistic linear geotemporal understandings of queer developing out of and in opposition to mature lesbian and gay social movements (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2011). In each of the contexts discussed here, queer activism has developed in interaction with other social movements and political traditions, and in response to specific ‘local’ conditions.
Radical queer activism in Israel/Palestine emerged in the early 2000s and was immediately forced to confront the geopolitical context of Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, the resistance of the second Palestinian Intifada and the Israeli military’s repressive response to it. At the Tel Aviv gay pride parade in June 2001, a contingent of about 200 people marched as a ‘black bloc’ proclaiming “there’s no pride in the occupation”. Their point was that it “was impossible to keep one’s sense of gay pride apart from one’s sense of shame and accountability as an Israeli” for the military occupation of Palestinian territories (Ziv 2010: 537). Out of this demonstration, the queer anti-occupation group Black Laundry was formed (see Ziv 2010 for an explanation of the genealogy of the group’s name). Over the next two years, Black Laundry utilised the language and direct action tactics of American (and British) queer activism organise around national LGBT issues, but it refused to allow these questions to remain ‘apolitical’ in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, at a time when the mainstream Israeli LGBT movement was calling for an end to anti-gay discrimination in the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and demonstrating their ‘good’ Israeli citizenship as gays who had served in the military, Black Laundry questioned the role of the IDF and the centrality of military service to Israeli citizenship. Black Laundry’s queer celebration of deviance was, in this context, a refusal to assimilate into a society founded on militarism, dispossession and active settler colonial occupation of Palestinian land. Symbolically and materially, Black Laundry reclaimed the taunt that they were ‘traitors’ and actively built relations of solidarity with lesbian and gay Palestinians (Baum 2006; Query 2004). Although Black Laundry did not survive for more than a couple of years, this political approach has been maintained by subsequent radical queer groups in Israel, who have sought to counter the homonationalist ‘pinkwashing’ of Israel as the most ‘gay-friendly’ state in the Middle East (Puar 2011). Israeli queer activism drew on North American experiences (and several key actors had had direct involvement with queer organising in London, New York and elsewhere); queer collectives across Europe and North America organised solidarity fundraising for Black Laundry. However, these transnational activist connections were strained when it was proposed to hold a Queeruption gathering in Tel Aviv in 2006 – some believed it was wrong to hold the gathering in a war zone (and feared its existence could be recuperated as a pinkwashed example of Israel’s tolerance); whilst others saw the gathering as an opportunity to express solidarity with Israeli anti-occupation activists and Palestinian queers.
To some extent, the Israeli example has parallels to the situation in North American and Western Europe where queer activist initiatives arose to challenge the assimilationist tendencies in maturing lesbian and gay movements. The situation in Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s was different. As Kulpa and Mizielinska (2011) have argued, the potential (and limitations) of queer politics must be understood in local/national contexts. They suggest that in some countries of Central and Eastern Europe, lesbian and gay identity-based organising can have profoundly queer effects within the national polity. But, at the same time, groups with a queer outlook and critique have also been central to initiating lesbian and gay identity politics in some Central and Eastern European contexts in what might be understood (from a Western perspective) as a ‘temporal disjuncture’. The work of the Queer Beograd Collective (2011) is illustrative of this tendency. Following the violent attack by neo-fascists and extreme nationalists on the first Belgrade Pride in June 2001, and the cancellation of the planned second Pride in 2004 due to similar threats, the Queer Beograd Collective organised an alternative form of event in September 2008.

“What does it mean to take action, to take responsibility to actively create the conditions for our existence? How do we negotiate this with the society around us? How do we shape our own societies so that our actions form and inform the world around us?

Queer Beograd is a direct action collective. Our roots are in dissatisfaction with waiting for anyone else to make for us the place we need for ourselves. After the failure of the 2004 Pride in Belgrade we decided it’s enough of being afraid and hiding, of thinking nothing could be done. We judged our tactics to match the situation and we TOOK ACTION.” (Queer Beograd Collective 2011: 11).

The collective built on the experience of building (temporary) queer autonomous spaces and direct action tactics from other queer movements and reapplied them in very different context. Again, there were key protagonists with experience of organising in Australia and Western Europe who organised alongside them. Faced with violently homophobic street-fighting fascist gangs, the collective tied their queer organising to anti-fascist direct action. Simultaneously, their events were also infused with playful genderqueer performances and street theatre. While members of the collective were prepared to physically confront the fascists and organise self-defence, the festival (like Gay Shame events and Queeruption gatherings) was a form of ‘constructive direct action’. In a situation where the police and other state authorities had forced the cancellation of pride events over concerns for ‘public safety’ the festival was an opportunity to “create without asking for permission” and to
“actively create the conditions for our own existence” (Queer Beograd Collective 2011: 17). The self-organised festival forged alliances and reciprocal solidarity with queer and anti-fascist activists across Central, Eastern Europe and Turkey, as well as with queers of colour and their allies organising in Western Europe (see Queer Beograd Collective 2011: 15 – 43). While the ‘solidarity’ offered by Western European lesbian and gay activists to groups organising in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, has frequently been critiqued for presenting those countries as ‘backwards’ and somehow ‘behind’ the ‘West’ (Kulpa and Miezilinska 2011; see also Binnie and Klesse, this volume), the Queer Beograd drew attention to those who were excluded from the homonationalist projects of established European Union member states.

**Queer’s limits**

Contemporary queer activism now often seeks to challenge homonormative lesbian and gay politics (and consumption practices) more than it addresses heteronormativity. I locate this trend both in relation to the changing sexual politics of neoliberalism (in which queer movements themselves are complicit), but also within the changing relationship between queer theory and street-based queer activism (Shepard 2010; see also Richardson, this volume).

Since the start of the 21st Century, much (self-defined) ‘radical’ queer activism has attempted to experiment prefiguratively with means of fostering non-hierarchical queer community ‘for queers of all sexualities and genders’ (Brown 2012). These rhizomatic global activist networks frequently organise these experiments on the basis of consensus decision-making processes and affinity groups. They proclaim themselves to be sex positive and against assimilation into heteronormative social relations. Like the North American queer collective of the same name, they are ‘against equality’ (Conrad 2010) – they challenge and critique the basis of rights claims for marriage and military service, and question who is privileged by the application of ‘hate crime’ legislation. If early queer activism primarily attempted to contest heteronormativity, this newer queer activism is just as opposed to homonormativity in its practices and rhetoric. At its best, this newer queer activism contests the complacent politics of the lesbian and gay mainstream, which has so consistently sought to win gay people’s compliance to a depoliticised and desexualised lifestyle founded on privatised, domestic consumption and the primacy of the romantic couple. In opposing homonormativity, queer
activists have celebrated the diversity of sexual and gender minorities who continue to (attempt to) live beyond heteronormative values.

This critique of homonormativity has been important; however, it sometimes seems that queer radicals now often expend more energy protesting gay liberals than they do challenging persistent heteronormativity. Of course, heteronormativity and homonormativity are intrinsically linked; but the danger of not directly contesting heteronormativity, is that queer activists cede the terms of the political debate to the liberal proponents of ‘equality’, ‘diversity’ and ‘post-homophobic policing’ delivered by the neoliberal state.

Although many radical queer initiatives have advocated and experimented with collective forms of social autonomy, these experiments exist in a contradictory relationship with the forms of individual autonomy, free choice and personal responsibility favoured by many advocates of neoliberalism. The very allure of (queer) autonomy stems from a desire for freedom. Those strands of contemporary queer radicalism that have been inspired by anarchist praxis have, to varying degrees, practiced forms of collective self-organisation and mutual aid as a means towards social autonomy (from capital and the state). This requires a continual negotiation between the potentially conflicting demands of collective responsibility and personal freedom. When this balancing act fails, too often, what began as a collective queer political experiment becomes reduced to a subcultural lifestyle choice or an individual fashion statement. This should not be taken as a reason not to experiment with queer alternatives in the first place. Even most failed experiments of this kind provide their protagonists with insights into how life (and sexual/gender difference) might be lived differently.

In a recent polemic, Shepard (2010: 512), himself a long-term participant in many queer activist projects in and around New York City, lamented that where once queer theory and activism informed each other, “queer theory has come to feel distant from the politics that once fuelled it”. He notes how academics, graduate students and public intellectuals helped develop critical theories that informed the work of ACT UP and SexPanic!, and that this intellectual dialogue flowed in both directions. For him,

“the field and the activism supporting it seemed to hit a creative brick wall when faced with the politics of neoliberalism, urban space, and quality of life politics in the late 1990s. (…) It is easier, after all, to theorize about a problem than solve it. Others
argue that much of queer theoretical writing [has] disengaged from activism, become obtuse, and only accessible to academics.” (Shepard 2010: 514).

I recognise these tendencies, even if I do not wholly subscribe to this view. It overlooks, for example, the influence of Lisa Duggan’s (2002) theorisation of ‘the new homonormativity’ on much queer activism over the last decade (as well as overlooking her own long-term contribution to the work of Queers for Economic Justice). Many other academic queer theorists clearly also contribute to and intervene in progressive and radical social movements (and the number of graduate students acting as protagonists in these movements are countless), but there remains a suspicion that academic knowledge production is now privileged in driving these encounters.

**Queer possibilities**

A decade ago Liz Highleyman (2002: 110) acknowledged,

“queer radicals today face a dilemma. Should we try to steer the mainstream GLBT movement in a more progressive direction, or work with other progressive activists in groups that are not queer-identified? Can – and should – a movement focused on gay and lesbian identity expand to encompass a full range of progressive causes?”

The cautionary reminder that she offered to radical queers at the time was that gay and lesbian people “do not – and should not – have a monopoly on issues of sexuality, desire, and gender,” (Highleyman 2002: 119). If queer’s radical potential is to be revived and move forward, it needs to develop new alliances with those people whose sexual and gendered subject positions are denigrated and marginalised in the reconfigured sexual politics of austerity period neoliberalism. The promotion of same-sex marriage in many national contexts has reinscribed the power of the privatised, domesticated couple (with mainstream lesbian and gay advocacy organisations repositioning themselves as the defenders and promoters of ‘family values’, rather than their critical opponents). In Britain and elsewhere, changes in welfare benefits have punitively affected single people and some couples who do not conform to middle class social norms and expectations. In much of southern Europe, austerity has pushed young people back into the parental home, for want of economically viable alternative living arrangements. We cannot fully predict what the consequences of these changes will be. However, it is clear that sexual politics in this period of austerity is
changing and the most stigmatised sexual ‘minorities’ are no longer (necessarily) lesbians and gay men.

Over the last decade and a half, the experiments with queer autonomy (described earlier) offered promising alternatives to neoliberal social relations. Those collective experimental impulses are currently in retreat, just when they are needed most. The desire to experiment creatively with collective alternatives to contemporary regimes of the normal could still be of utility; but, needs to about more than the accumulation of subcultural capital. Contemporary queer movements could usefully develop means of engaging with the worries of those diverse sexual and gender minorities now struggling with the effects of austerity; outraged by the persistent prejudices of supposedly ‘tolerant’ societies; and undernourished by the limited options offered by the homonormative mainstream. Even if queer’s potential to move people has faded, the lessons of its rise and fall will be crucial to forging a new radical sexual politics for precarious times.

Bibliography

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