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Cultural Marxism and intersectionality

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Cultural Marxism, intersectionality, neoliberalism, Nuit Debout, race

The evening following the massacre in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, I attended a commemoration event in Paris organized at the Place de la République by Nuit Debout (the French version of the Occupy Movement). It took a long time before the mass shooting was addressed. We first had to declare our solidarity with the Palestinian people in the occupied territories, to condemn police brutality against undocumented migrants, to support a strike against welfare state retrenchment, and so on. Then, finally, someone made direct mention of the 49 gay men killed by Omar Mateen.

Many LGBT people left the event frustrated: why can't we just commemorate the killing of these gay men? Wasn't the event organized so that we – as LGBTs – could share *our* grief, instead of sharing in the sorrows of others? Are all these topics related anyway? Why would that be the case? Are we facing the same overarching enemy (probably neoliberalism, as many of the speakers, even those discussing cultural topics, argued)?

I often think back to this evening when I encounter right-wing attacks on cultural Marxism, so popular among the Alt-right these days. These radical right-wingers often claim – as if unearthing a conspiracy – that a small left-wing elite is undermining the core values of western societies, imposing their ideas on gender, sexuality, national identity, race, Islam, and other issues. Some perceive a coherent left-wing agenda that should be stopped before it destroys 'western civilization' (their analyses come close to Oswald Spengler's *Die Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918)). They are wrong, of course; the left in most western countries is in crisis, far from influential, let alone dominant. In hindsight, I was relieved that they were

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not at Place de la République that evening, when it seemed that these themes were indeed all connected – so strongly connected that one could not speak about gay rights without mentioning multiple other forms of oppression.

Nuit Debout has, like most other recent influential social movements, a totalizing tendency, as if topics are necessarily related, as if — there actually is something like cultural Marxism. Today's movements increasingly mobilize under the banner of global social justice. Occupy and Anonymous have become all-encompassing brands linking and mixing numerous struggles. Even though the radical right lives in a fantasy world, some activists on the left seem to live up to their worst nightmares.

These developments within social movements correspond to analyses of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991, 1992), the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, sexuality, and so on. As Audre Lorde put it: 'We don't live single issues lives.' I readily acknowledge that intersectional analysis has been enlightening in many fields. It has shown how black women – as quintessential intersectional subjects (Nash, 2008) – are not just discriminated against as women, but based on race and sexuality as well (Collins, 2004). Many struggles have successfully been understood as deeply intersectional; as an analytical tool, it has made various forms of marginalization and discrimination visible in their entanglement. Particularly when the specificity of the intersections is fleshed out (for example by Baumann and Gingrich in their *Grammars of Identity/Alterity*, 2004), it provided new insights into the lived practices of subaltern peoples.

But over time, intersectionality lost some of its empirical rigor. As has been pointed out by new generations of scholars, the interesting question is not whether identities are multi-dimensionally intersected (they often are), but how the very categories come into being and get connected (*enacted*). Similar criticisms have been voiced by scholars who favor a break from understanding differences as stable and pre-existing (Brubaker, 2004; Haraway, 1997; Valentine, 2007), who show how precarious some of these links indeed are.

As the readers of *Sexualities* know, homosexuality is in many places and times understood as a form of gender deviance. In such situations, it makes sense to analyze discrimination against gays and lesbians in relation to gender and its inequalities. But homosexuality has recently 'emancipated' itself: in the perspective of many LGBTs as well as their straight allies, it is no longer a form of gender deviance. This is not to say that gays are now always and everywhere discriminated against on the sole basis of being a sexual minority. For instance, some African leaders have recently claimed that homosexuality is un-African, linking (homo)sexuality to race, which makes it necessary to analyze how these categories get produced in their entanglement. And clearly the impossibility of being 'Muslim gay' begs for an intersectional analysis of religion and sexuality (Rahman, 2010).

But the point remains: attitudes towards homosexuality in many countries have become more and more disentangled from (among other things) political preference, religion, age and geography (city versus rural areas).

Given these developments, I would welcome informed naiveté: Is sexuality linked to gender? When? Why? By whom? Under what specific conditions? Instead of all-encompassing analyses, my plea is for parsimony: not to deny that sometimes some sexual differences are enacted in entanglement with religion, or class, or race, but not to assume that all these categories are pertinent, let alone *necessarily* interrelated, connected. Deconstruction then means opting for minimalism; we don't start from the assumption that everything is complex or complicated. We dissect instead of intersect.

This is not only a better *scholarly* agenda, but a better *political* one as well. The all-encompassing strategy of recent social movements – perhaps out of the intention to include as many people as possible – eventually asks too much: the greatest common denominator is too small, and only attracts people for whom all struggles are connected, intersected. But those who want to struggle, for example for sexual liberation, do not necessarily support the Palestinian cause. Support for gay and lesbian causes now comes from across the political spectrum in many countries. Why not welcome new allies (within limits) and broaden the support for specific causes?

Subjects such as sexuality attract most support when treated as single issues. A single-issue movement is not 'missing' something, but opens up the space for various people to support its cause. Those who claim that various struggles *are* interrelated often mean that they *should* be interrelated; that people who care for LGBTs should care for racial justice as well, and vice versa. Although I think that there might be good normative reasons to link certain struggles, I wonder whether minority groups should specifically care for each other. Why? For reasons of history? For reasons of effective mobilization? Is a rainbow coalition always the most effective? The fact that forms of discrimination were historically entangled does not guarantee successful partnering in the future.

Except if we assume that there is one overarching cleavage, pertinent to all forms of social struggle. Marxists and others might claim that neoliberalism is such an encompassing context. But what space does this leave for others who don't identify as Marxists, let alone as cultural Marxists...?

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