Que(e)rying political practices in Europe: Tensions in the struggle for sexual minority rights

Beger, N.J.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 30 years Europe has seen the rise of social movements fighting nationally and transnationally for participation rights in society. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender movements are one example. In addition—particularly in the wake of the AIDS crisis—sexuality has become central to modern politics. Academic theorists have increasingly paid attention to the epistemological and ontological roles gender and sexuality play in the creation and maintenance of political, social and economic domains. However, in the daily process of arguing for and about rights the centrality of those roles is mostly hidden from view in official institutional and movement discourses. This book seeks to investigate the practices of gay and lesbian rights and lobby politics in Europe and their open and hidden relations to binary and hierarchical orders of dominance. From the vantage point of critical queer theory I will examine political and legal texts to trace the centrality of gender and sexuality for the conditions of European political discourses.

Within Europe there are two supranational institutions at which rights are claimed: the European Union (EU) and the Council of Europe (CoE). As international political bodies, the European Union and the Council of Europe have—besides the economic role of the EU—a strong historical commitment to human rights, social integration, equality, and the overcoming of nationalistic prejudice. In fact, the concern for developing an inclusive European citizenship is becoming increasingly important in the political conceptualisation of the EU. Therefore, Europe—as institution and idea—has become one of the major stages on which the fight for rights is played out by those alleging discrimination and social exclusion. According to political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998:208), countries most vulnerable to pressure from advocacy and minority rights groups are those who care about their international image. This is generally true for the all Members of the European Union and also of the Council of Europe. Their institutions are susceptible to advocacy networks and, thus, have become an important target of achieving change. Yet, the pre-conditions and consequences of specifically European rights discourses have hardly been researched.

The conventions of identity-based rights politics dominate the field of minority movements and the official politics of governments in relation to issues of social justice, equality, and anti-discrimination. In the history of lesbian and gay movements, change of the status quo through reform—social and legal—has likely been the most successful rally point of mobilisation. The first phase related and relates usually to a de-criminalisation of homosexual (male) offences, age of consent, sodomy laws and other coercive state practices, such as police harassment, neglect to prosecute hate crimes, and rights of speech and assembly. The second phase was and is usually a shift from “keeping the state off our backs” to a rights movement that demands partnership rights and positive re-enforcement in employment, as well as social and legal protection from all forms of discrimination. For European gay and
Lesbian movements today both of these phases are still current in various regions of the geographic continent of Europe. None of these demands, from simple decriminalisation to gay and lesbian marriage or adoption has become entirely obsolete in any European country.

The achievement of reform in the social, legal, political, and economic domains of Europe is doing more than encourage gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people to 'come out'. The struggle for these rights have promoted a feeling of pride, self-worth, public subculture, and community identity. It has also produced a politicking process that facilitates public awareness, mobilisation, and the development of a specific gay, lesbian, and bisexual as well as transgender practice and theory. While this holds true to my mind, an unqualified praise of rights and reform is questionable without analysing the status quo of gender and sexuality as ordering principles. For lesbians and gay men legal rights and lobby politics have, on the one hand won rights of survival, expression and social acceptance. On the other hand it is precisely those identity-based politics which have created problems for the inclusion and acceptance of alternative sexualities into a norm(ality) that is ultimately set up to signify and exclude difference.

In response to this, activists in the USA developed a form of queer politics in the early nineties. At the same time theorists in the field of sexuality and gender started to use poststructuralist thought to investigate the epistemological, ontological, legal, economic and social conditions of identity-based rights politics and movements. The focus shifted away from challenges to political or legal rules and moved towards challenges of analytic categories and explanatory systems in politics. To be precise, they moved towards the way gender and sexuality are psychologically and socially realised and maintained in a hierarchical order in the first place. Following ideas coming from the field of literary and film studies, a substantial set of philosophical, sociological, political and legal writings has arisen in the North-American, British and Australian/New Zealand context. Apart from some work about Great Britain, however, very little has been written about European national contexts and nothing at the transnational European level using a queer and poststructuralist approach. This book aims to fill some part of this gap.

The connection between theory and practice has been an issue at the forefront of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender studies. With the advent and increasing dominance of queer theory as academic currency in the US there is an apparent break-down of that connection. Many scholars in feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies accuse writers in queer theory of rendering politics and the achievement of rights and equality an impossibility. It is not my intention to re-examine this breakdown nor the merits of queer theory qua theory since this has

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1 See Lauren Berlant & Elizabeth Freeman (1992) for an explanation of these queer street politics.
2 See, for example, Ruth Goldman (1996), Biddy Martin (1994), Sally O'Driscoll (1996), and Eric Savoy (1994).
been amply explored and debated. What becomes clear from the literature is that letting go of legal rights and equality entirely will not do; but taking them for granted and unquestionable will not do either. What concerns me here, therefore, is an analysis from a queer theoretical perspective of the implications of doing politics and achieving rights or justice in the European context. In doing so I will add to a newly emerging body of literature that employs a queer theoretical analysis rather than merely perpetuating the polarised debate on queer theory's implications.

More precisely, I investigate the major themes through which gay and lesbian politics are argued, conceptualised and staged in the European context by those who work and lobby for them. Relevant themes are, among others, anti-discrimination, human rights, marriage and family, social and economical participation, equality, and age of consent laws. The question posed is then how these themes impact upon some of the fundamental ordering principles of modern democratic societies: gender, kinship, citizenship, humanness, and the law. To address this question I investigate texts on several levels: firstly, political texts, such as parliamentary reports, resolutions, and speeches; secondly, court judgements and legislation drafted by the EU Commission; thirdly, statements, submissions, and programmes written by activists; and, fourthly, quotations from interviews conducted with activists who work at the European level. I focus on one advocacy network and NGO (Non-Governmental-Organisation), ILGA-Europe—the European region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association—which is the only lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lobbyist officially accredited within the European structures.

While I primarily focus on the precise themes through which gay and lesbian rights are argued, it is also my aim to consider the history of European sexual rights lobbying, the complexity of the queer theoretical intervention into these political practices, and the difficulties of transfer between theory and politics. This has led me to divide the book into three parts. Part One will contribute to the lack of overviews over the European situation in terms of institutional and legal information and in terms of discussing queer theory’s background and implications for Europe as well as the meaning of political practices. Part One also contributes to a necessary negotiation of the seeming impasse in the exchange between theory and political practice.

However, the second chapter of Part One already starts with the deployment of theoretical and political concepts, which is the theme of analysis that carries the reader through the longer Part Two. In Part Two, each chapter reviews a selection of documents and interviews for the systems and orders they draw upon. Five political concepts—or rights claims—are analysed in this respect: human rights, anti-discrimination, legal politics, citizenship, and kinship. These chapters focus on the

organisational level of sexual rights claims. Part Three follows the same type of analysis, but briefly foregrounds the individual level of activism and the concept of agency.

After Foucault, one could speak of a genealogical reading of the conditions that allow homosexuality to be staged the way it is in the European cultural context. This book will not create this genealogy itself, but use the substantial work already done in that field.\(^4\) I depart from the understandings of those works to analyse how the main pre-conditions of gender and sexuality create the script for a European sexual politics drama and how a transnational political stage becomes the space for re-instalment and re-negotiation of these conditions. Thus, I aim to combine the analysis of practical politics with furthering theoretical thought on the gendered and sexual constitution of social and political relations. The texts analysed for this purpose operate on three levels: the personal narrative of activists, the written narrative of official texts of the movements petitioning European institutions, and the written narrative of official documents of the European institutions themselves.\(^5\)

Through the engagement with this material and with queer theory as critical theory, I conclude that political practices engaged around gender and sexuality are simultaneously a re-inscription and a contestation of the laws and orders that govern two of the most decisive ordering principles of European cultures: gender and sexuality. The following critical analysis of gay and lesbian politics intends to develop the re-thinking of political rights discourses in a way that disrupts the logic of sexuality as a definable, natural core of humanity while emphasising the central role it plays within the political domain.

The term gay and lesbian politics is used for the traditional legal rights and lobby politics I scrutinise. Yet, I am fully aware that these are not the only gay and lesbian politics in Europe. In fact, there are many different understandings of what the involvement in the political means to different groups of activists and their approach to achieving change varies greatly. Gay and lesbian politics have ranged from visibility rallies, kiss-ins, or civil disobedience to traditional rights advocacy. The

\(^{4}\) Such as the work of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, David Halperin, Michael Warner, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

\(^{5}\) The material was collected from public and private archives, through work stays in Brussels and Strasbourg, through talking to activists and parliamentarians, and through the internet. The latter was used in several ways: e-mail information groups and newsletters; the e-mail network of the executive board of ILGA-Europe; the website of ILGA and ILGA-Europe, and the European Institutions and Courts. The internet has, thus, been a key method and locus of research. I have come to appreciate why the instrumentality of the internet as a research tool and a sphere of political action has gained credibility among political activists and among academic researchers in the 1990s. In particular, the internet presents a realm of investigation that implicates the interwoven character of research and political practice, which is also central to this book. Through three years of intensive research and collection of material, I gathered a great wealth of official documents, court cases, personal accounts, newspaper clippings, journals or written conference reports. Gathering this large amount of material made it possible to gain a comprehensive overview of the actual happenings and practices, and, thus, was crucial for making the selective choices of material in each chapter.
reason I focus on the latter is, firstly, that they are the kind of politics which have been most heavily criticised from a critical feminist, queer, or postcolonial viewpoint. The juxtaposition of theoretical critique and the struggle for rights is most obvious here and, thus, offers the best scope for examining the ruptures in both wherever they meet. Secondly, no other form of political activism has been so successful in mobilising large political debates over decades. This is not the case, because rights politics are the only successful politics—whatever success means in connection to the political—but because they fit into the dominant definition of the political. Rights politics for minorities fit the bill of those discourses with dominantly structure capitalist, parliamentary democracies throughout the world. Since it is important to understand those discourses in relation to their heavy dependence on systems of gender and sexuality, I chose to investigate the kinds of rights politics that find resonance in those discourses.

Throughout this book I focus on analysing lesbian and gay politics specifically, while strongly insisting on alliances with and inclusion of bisexuality and transgender issues. This is due to the wealth of available documents and the long history of lesbian and gay lobbying. The issues of bisexuality and transgender would need to be addressed more specifically and thoroughly than possible within the scope of this book. Yet, any queer approach insists on the intrinsic connections between biological sex, gender identity, and sexualities. A queer approach could, thus, suggest an intrinsic connectedness of the issues and the use of umbrella terms. However, I have chosen not to simply lump together lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender—the infamous l/g/b/t as short term—by default since that would only add to the marginalisation and silencing that bisexuals and transgender people already encounter within gay and lesbian studies and political movements. Wherever I use the term l/g/b/t I specifically mean to name them together. It includes a clear awareness of the connecting issues involved and does not simply use queer as a synonym for l/g/b/t, while actually only talking about lesbians and gays. In fact, queer as identity or group label is not used at all in this book, since I consider it an improper, vague and contradictory usage of the term queer. Wherever the politics I analyse are in fact and reality, only concerned with lesbians and gay men I will use those terms, while insisting on a political and theoretical connection between homosexuality and gender identity as I explain in Chapter Six. The terminology is, thus, specific, and consciously chosen throughout the text.

6 Chapter Six, for example, is partly dedicated to the connection between homosexuality and transgender.  
7 In the following I will shorten lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender to l/g/b/t since that has been established in official documents internationally and has become a commonly used term. Gay and lesbian will be spelled out and not shortened. All other terms and abbreviations are explained in the glossary.
Chapter Outline

In the remainder of this introduction I will address some questions regarding the method employed in this book and my own relationship to the process of this research. Chapter One and will start with providing the reader not familiar with all the details of European politics with the necessary background information to understand the later analysis. *European Institutions: Sexual Rights Lobbying*, introduces the European Union, the Council of Europe and their institutions, the history of gay, lesbian, and transgender rights politics at these institutions, and ILGA-Europe as a transnational advocacy network. Chapter Two, *Queer Theory and Political Practices*, is a critical reflection on the character of theory and politics, the terms around which my inquiry is based. It develops a working definition of queer theory and of political practices, reflects on the transfer of queer theory to an European context, and sets out the theoretical principles this book adheres to. The concept of meaning is engaged to understand how politics become effective practices.

The third chapter, *Mind the Gap: Hybrid Relations of Queer Theory and Political Practice*<sup>8</sup>, concludes the first part of this book. It addresses a central theme of my initial involvement with this topic: the travelling between rights activism and theoretical critique. The apparent practice-theory gap that is usually opened in relation to the discussion of queer concepts, is in urgent need of reconceptualisation, and ultimate abandonment. I suggest a deployment of hybridity as analytical concept to straddle this gap.

Theoretical and political concepts are the thread that also leads through the second part of this book. Chapter Four, *European Strategies: Human Rights*<sup>9</sup>, focuses on a critical discussion of the central rights strategy used in Europe: human-rights argumentation. I illustrate the centrality of human rights discourse in the European context and address the conditions, predicaments, and consequences of the claim “Homosexual Rights are Human Rights”. The principles this claim calls upon, such as freedom, equality, integrity, and respectability, pose a crucial question when confronted with sexual rights. They imply cultural definitions of humanness and who is—or is not—included in those definitions.

Chapter Five, *Claiming Protection: Anti-Discrimination*, centres on an important theme of l/g/b/t rights struggles: discrimination and the fight for anti-discrimination legislation. The need for anti-discrimination measures has so far never been critically deconstructed. Yet, a careful exploration of the concrete implications of the discourse of discrimination illuminates tensions suggesting that the struggle

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<sup>8</sup> A version of this chapter appeared under Beger (2001) “Mind the Gap: Hybridity and the Antagonistic Relations of Queer Theory and Gay/Lesbian Political Practice” In Joyce Goggin and Sonja Neef (eds.) *Traveling Concepts: Text, Subjectivity, and Hybridity*.

<sup>9</sup> A brief summary of the argumentation used here appeared under Beger (1999) “Gay and Lesbian Rights are Human Rights! Que(e)rying a Political Practice in Europe” in Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis Privacies. *Yearbook* 1999.
for rights is only apparently unproblematic. I examine the way activists speak about discrimination and, thus, politically materialise and utilise the situation of lesbians and gay men in Europe. This incorporates themes and concepts—such as material change, ideological rewards, diversity, liberal legal equality and the hegemony of the juridical—which can be read as problematic from a philosophical and a practical political view, albeit in a different way from each other.

The issue of legal rights and their implications is brought up again in Chapter Six. *Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: Legal Rights Politics*\(^{10}\) will make use of the interpretation a queer theoretical reading offers for the fight for rights in courts. Through an emphasis on the simultaneity of regulation and disruption, the analysis of two important court cases at the European Court of Justice will allow me to problematise the hope for justice and equality in court rooms.\(^{11}\) The discussion of the cases necessitates critical reflection on the realm of law not as an all-powerful discourse, but as an important site for the constitution, consolidation, and regulation of sexuality. However, the cases also feature a high potential for disruption through their interconnection of gender and sexuality, gender identity and sexual orientation, and, subsequently, homosexual and transgender politics. This connection is a central tenet of queer thought and will be argued for from a political, a theoretical and a legal perspective.

I then proceed to discussing another ordering principle of European politics, namely citizenship. Chapter Seven, *A Process of Recognition: European Citizenship*, points to the historical, political, and economic legacies implied in the call to European citizenship. This, once again, illuminates intricate complexities and tensions in the claim to citizenship, such as the ideology of nation states, transnationalism, an Eurocentric exclusion of the racial and ethnic other, or the economic focus of European citizenship. In principle the call to end a second-class citizen status necessarily involves recognition of the equal validity of lesbian and gay membership in the existing citizenship order. In fact, the process of recognition becomes the key to understanding the contradictory complexities of citizenship and the need to change the nature of citizenship claims.

The demand for equal citizenship is commonly assessed against the legal and social recognition gay and lesbian partnerships receive. In fact, marriage and the right to adoption, custody, or artificial insemination—in short the right to be recognised as a family—are the central rallying point of European gay and lesbian rights struggles and also the greatest stumbling block. Chapter Eight, *Framing a Debate: Kinship*, focuses on the condition of the political kinship debate in Europe. I argue that kinship is the frame within which the social being that forms the basis for the political sphere in European culture is created, shaped and enacted. Using two

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\(^{10}\) A version of this chapter appeared under Beger (2000a) "Queer Readings of Europe: Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation and the (im)potency of rights politics at the European Court of Justice" *Social & Legal Studies* 9(2):251-272.

\(^{11}\) *P v S* and *Cornwall County Council* (1996); *Lisa Grant v South West Trains* (1998).
specific examples, I analyse what kinship is presumed to be when discussed in the sphere of political institution. This analysis illuminates once more the apparent tensions between justifiable claims to family recognition and the problem that these claims contribute to reinstating heteronormativity as the overarching frame of any kinship debate. The concept of framing can increase our understanding of the relationship between political kinship debates and heteronormativity without reducing the one to the other.

The third part and final chapter, The Political Activist: Agency, dares to make the leap from the organisational and institutional level to the individual level of the activists involved. The way the activists interviewed addressed their own possibilities of achieving change is not simple and straightforward. In fact, they highlight contradictions and complexities, which can only be conceptualised and grasped if the theory of agency is re-thought and moved away from its connection to the so-called independent, free will of autonomous and coherent humanist subjects. Although the framework in which most activists locate their agency seems to be a liberal humanist framework, the way they actually express their agency already includes a re-thinking of that framework. After briefly introducing the terms of the academic debate on political agency, I trace the understandings of agency in the interviews and propose to interpret them within a poststructuralist frame of agency with regard to political practices. The Afterword, Tensions in the Struggle for Minority Rights, concludes this study with a summary of the apparent tensions in the struggle for sexual minority rights in Europe and the many areas which still require research and to which this book could not make a contribution.

Through my reading of interviews and political texts, as well as gay and lesbian studies and queer writing, I have come to realise the risks involved in any attempt to come up with a definite characterisation of European political practices or l/g/b/t perspectives. The possibility of simultaneous assertion and rupture of the orders that maintain an exclusionary and discriminatory system of hierarchised binaries, is present in all political practices. The task of critical analysis is to draw out the implications and pitfalls of political practice as well as their potential for rupture, which could, hopefully, subsequently be strengthened. Overall, I suggest that a theoretically informed queer and poststructuralist reading of political documents and interviews can contribute to an understanding of the conditions upon which politics of inclusion, participation, social justice, and equality rest. It can illuminate how the paradigms of political discourses constitute, consolidate, and contest the meaning and cultural significance of gender and sexuality in modern, democratic, capitalist European societies. Before embarking on such a reading, however, the method I

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12 I want to emphasise that my usage of poststructuralist approaches is based on the feminist response to deconstruction. The term does not represent a political model of poststructuralism, but a politically rethought theory challenged and informed by feminist and later queer readings of its own rules and assumptions.
employ in my analysis and my own position in relation to the material investigated need to be clarified.

Method

This book offers a transdisciplinary theoretical analysis of the political practices of specific sexual politics. Throughout this book I will need to make use of strategies and principles from many disciplines, mainly from legal studies, philosophy, and political science. Insights from psychoanalysis, feminist theory, and cultural analysis are also utilised at several points. The nature of transdisciplinarity is certainly not to cover all classics and methods of each discipline and make the research fully sufficient inside every discipline touched. Yet, sloppy scholarship disguised as transdisciplinary approach is not the alternative to overcoming disciplinary presuppositions. Certain disciplinary presuppositions and methodical rules block the view to some more complex connections between cultural orders such as gender and sexuality. To analyse them in more detail, insights from different disciplines need to be used to grasp the connections. The analysis in this book, for example, could not have been done without understanding the principles of legal interpretation and how judgements are formulated. Yet, the legal analysis of the texts alone would not have allowed me to emphasise a rather philosophical approach to how sexuality and gender function underneath political concepts such as human rights.

Transdisciplinarity in this book is an encounter of different disciplines in a partial but deliberate exchange of premises and methodological possibilities. The borders of each discipline are taken to be porous. According to Mieke Bal (2001:2), such definition of transdisciplinarity—in her case interdisciplinarity—is only tenable if it is accompanied by the development of a method that covers an understandable and arguable common ground. For Bal (2001:7) the study of theoretical concepts are the method that develops such common ground:

It is around concepts that I see cultural analysis achieving a consensus comparable to the paradigmatic consistency that has kept the traditional disciplines vital, albeit, simultaneously, dogmatic. Rejecting dogmatism without sacrificing consistency is one way of improving the human ambience while increasing the

13 Since my first university degrees were in an transdisciplinary field, the nature of transdisciplinarity has been a concern of mine. It was Mieke Bal who, finally, made the concepts of transdisciplinarity and interdisciplinarity fully tenable for me and developed a method with which some of its possible pitfalls can be avoided. However, Bal primarily utilises the term interdisciplinarity rather than transdisciplinarity. I employ the term transdisciplinarity here, since interdisciplinarity refers to the idea of reaching out to broaden and critically inform research issues one has formulated to some extent from one's disciplinary interest, which is always porous in its borders. Transdisciplinarity indicates a bit more that the initial research question never was designed out of any disciplinary interest in the first place, but already as something that arises out of questions, methods, texts, and academic traditions from many disciplines.
intellectual yield. This is why I consider the discussion of concepts as an alternative methodological base for cultural studies or analysis.

In this book concepts play two roles: as theoretical concepts and as political themes. The former turns certain concepts—such as meaning, hybridity, framing, recognition, and indeed gender—into analytical tools which frame my reading of texts and produce, in turn, a frame within which certain complexities can be grasped. I follow Bal (2001:7-11) in understanding concepts to be programmatic and normative, developmental, bound to a tradition, more than tools, and perceptible to personal investment. If scrutinised carefully they can be seen to have travelled from the field in which they emerged, change their meaning and the meaning of the insights in the field where they are newly employed. As political themes, concepts—such as human rights, the law, anti-discrimination, citizenship, or kinship—become the frames within which political practices are bundled for analysis. Here concepts are understood as themes which guide political action and dominate political discourses or orders. It is these concepts that rule the meaning of rights, equality, and justice. As political themes concepts are yet again, signed and dated, changeable, programmatic, and normative.

The concrete method with which both forms of concepts are brought to my research questions is the process of reading. According to Bal (1996:32) “reading is an act of reception, of assigning meaning”. As a reader preoccupied with certain poststructuralist and feminist convictions about the cultural dominance of gender and sexuality, my assessment of political texts is an act of re-framing the words originally said in very specific formulae of, for example, judgements or parliamentary speeches. In general terms any viewing, listening or reading is a way of framing, which, in turn, presents a “constant semiotic activity, without which no cultural life can function” (Bal 1996:33).

Thus, the result, or the product, of my reading is a conclusion of propositional content: to identify underlying systems of dominance which I trace in the texts I analyse. I try to activate those texts and put them to work in relation to a specific way of interpreting political concepts as themes and of engaging theoretical concepts to understand the implications of these themes. This implies taking texts out of their proper context and departing from a strict analysis of them according to the rules of the discipline that usually assesses them in their specificity. It means transporting them into a frame of analysis they were not written for, but which one keeps sensing when listening to them without being allowed to view them under a conglomerate of different disciplinary insights. While reading is, according to Mieke Bal (1996:39), not an idiosyncratic act, it is definitely a subjective act. The way I read and analysed my material has a subjective connection to the way this research was initially designed.
The T in the Text

I came to this project with a specific interest in bridging the apparent gap between poststructuralist theory and political practice. I was fuelled by a careful fascination with the idea of Europe and the possibilities of overcoming nationalism into a wider cosmopolitan identification based on regions, diversity, and securing peace. Additionally, I was aware of my own desire for rights, particularly those rights that would help me secure a residence permit for my New Zealand partner in the EU. Yet, at the same time I was deeply suspicious of the implied inclusion into a heteronormative system, which is the only inclusion these rights truly secure. In the course of the four years of this research project all of those motivations became troubling in themselves, partly because I became oblivious to them, partly because I began to find them naïve, and partly because they were simply the wrong starting point for this project. However, to remain conscious of the conditions under which I started the project and under which I conducted the interviews and collected material, these conditions and my personal involvement in politics need to be at least mentioned here.

For reasons of my academic background and my initial interests in this topic, it seemed useful to combine an academic quest with political issues I felt passionate about and involve myself in the very politics I was going to research. In the course of this research I worked in l/g/b/t politics in two directions: on the one hand for l/g/b/t rights groups mainly at European level and in Germany. On the other hand I have been involved in a project lasting several years—culminating in an international conference and a book—to discuss and evaluate queer theory for a German debate on democratic participation.

The European region of the International Lesbian and Gay Association became an important focus of concern and took up a large part of my time over the years. I am a member of the executive board and have represented ILGA-Europe on many occasions ranging from activist conferences to meetings with Parliamentarians, Ministers or Ambassadors, either in different European countries or at European institutions. Through their membership in ILGA-Europe, I have been able to get to know activist groups all over Europe—East and West—and groups that work independently from national contexts. ILGA-Europe’s emphasis on joint work with other NGOs in the Social Policy Platform at the EU, also created the possibility of working together with activists from other networks concerned with issues such as racism, disability, age, and gender equality. These experiences have shaped my thinking as significantly as my academic involvement in queer and feminist poststructuralist theory.

Since my political work tended to take over the lion’s share of my time, it also became a significant part of my daily concern and the working relations with activists from all over Europe turned more often than not into cherished friendships. The meaning of international solidarity within the movement is surely illusory as long as
it relies only on clear meanings of homosexual identities that all share. Yet, solidarity has been a concrete and practical resource in my life. In fact, this book would never have been written without the dinners, beds, car rides, knowledge transfers, e-mails, talks, and personal support that I have been given in many cities of Europe when travelling for ILGA-Europe and with my tape recorder for my research project. However, once the concrete writing process started this involvement—while having been an essential pre-condition for venturing into a critical analysis in the first place—also rendered itself problematic.

In some instances I lacked the distance from my material as some of the political texts to be analysed were written by myself or I at least participated in their formulation. Distance and self-critique, thus had to be analysed to even start writing an academic project. The 'I' in the text is consequently more than a lip-service to feminist research methodology acknowledging the non-existence of objectivity and positioning the researcher as subject of the text. (Stanley 1990) My own presence in the writing is an integral part of this book, a necessity that cannot be escaped. However, being part of my own subject matter as well as being the subject of it, is not only apparent through my political involvement, but also through the volatile academic status of researchers in the theory of gender and sexuality.

Coming to Europe, the university context in which I involved myself at the beginning made me notice the exclusion of anything relating to gender and sexual politics from the permitted academic theoretical rhetoric. It made me painfully aware that the challenges queer theory offers were not only directed to the kind of rights politics I was just getting involved in; they also offered a constant challenge to the kind of academic persona I permanently failed to present in the university context I was in. This only ceased to be a problem once I had changed to the Amsterdam School of Cultural Analysis, at which the intersections of critical theory and social practice are a legitimate academic pursuit. Overall, the journey of this book has been a journey of changing concerns, one of conflicts at all sides. My research created a critical stance that one cannot bring home fully anywhere—not to my activist colleagues nor to my academic colleagues—but that remains interesting precisely because of this. My analysis in the following ultimately reflects on my own discomfort with the seeming contradictions of theory and political practice. It also reflects on my discomfort with the necessity to pretend there are such things as clearly describable sexual politics or a clearly distinguishable queer theory, none of which is ultimately possible. The process of writing this text was a process of constant negotiation among various claims, desires, and positions. I was often desperately trying to be a professional academic and a professional political activist at the same time. In the course of time, I have learned how to fail at both and accept that not as lack of achievement, but as a convincing sign for the impossibility of coherent, un-ruptured professional and personal identities. I want to emphasise that these contradictions are the main underlying theme throughout this book and I have not excluded myself and my work from the critical analysis I make, although only
Chapter Three deals with this issue explicitly. My sense of rupture also implies consequences for the relationship between me, the researcher, and one part of my material, the interviewees.

The Researcher and the Researched

I conducted interviews with gay and lesbian activists who hold some form of office in ILGA or are very active on the European stage, and with officials working for EU institutions, some, but not all, of whom are lesbian or gay themselves. All the interviews were guided by a question catalogue I had given the interviewees in advance and which was also used as guidance during the interview. After some test runs, I defined the type of interviews I conducted as problem-centred, narrative interviews (Witzel 1996), in which I try not to interrupt the flow of talking with questions in the beginning. In the second part of the interview I usually tried to cover the left-overs of the questions on the interview guide, if I felt larger question blocks had not been addressed at all. In nearly all oral interviews I contributed some of my own thoughts at the end, since nearly all interviewees wanted to know more about my research interests. These last sections of the interviews have not been used in the analysis since they are fairly structured by the ideas I voiced and to which the interviewees then responded.

The interviews were mainly conducted in English, but three preferred German, which is another language we shared. I subsequently translated the relevant quotations of these interviews into English and, thus, take full responsibility for the choice of words in these interviews. Since most interviewees are not English native speakers, I also corrected obvious grammatical mistakes in the quotations as long as that did not change the content. In principle, though, I retained both their sentence structure and their choice of words, as well as their way of writing in the case of the e-mail interviews. The interviews were conducted in two different ways, written via e-mail correspondence or tape recorded and subsequently ordered according to themes. I did not produce full transcripts of all oral interviews, but rather chose to order their content according to themes and categories of analysis. I chose this method since it involved a repeated listening to the interview tapes that allowed me to discover different nuances each time. This is a rather unorthodox method closest to theme-related evaluation and problem centred interviewing (Flick 1998, Witzel 1996), but has proven itself to be useful for my purposes.

Moreover, my focus is not a close narrative analysis of the interviews. Thus, I neither attempt to give an in-depth analysis of the narrative structure of the interviews, nor do I claim to fully represent the contents of what has been said. The interviews function in my analysis, on the one hand as means to gather facts otherwise not recorded or written down anywhere. On the other hand, they function as one way of investigating the precise workings of certain discourses employed as political practices. The interviews are, therefore, no more central to the analysis than
the other documents used. This means that the reader will not be able to gain a full sense of the individual positioning and opinions of every interviewee, but will only meet the interviewees in small selected segments in some of the chapters. Only Chapter Ten offers an entirely interview-based analysis. Altogether I conducted 15 interviews with 16 people, four via e-mail and eleven audio-taped. Two of the interviews are not quoted in the text, but were an important part of the research process and a part of my analysis.

The particular relationships of power between myself and my interviewees in this research did not fit comfortably into the paradigms of feminist methodology. In general, feminist research methodology assumes the interview process to give voice to those who are powerless or marginalised, and, thus, emphasises power relations between the researcher and the researched. (Gluck & Patai 1991) The interviewees could not be placed in the category of the dispossessed or marginalised very easily. Many of them have high powered jobs with a good earning capacity. All take enough pride in their political work to deem it central, important, and empowering, including the interviewees from Eastern Europe. Thus, while these individuals were mostly, arguably, dispossessed of rights in relation to their sexual orientation, in many other ways most of them identify their lives as privileged. Although there are certainly differences of degree, this holds true for both groups of interviewees, activists and EU officials.

Therefore, my relation to the interviewees contained both, the power assigned to academics who can proceed at liberty with the interview material and the power of those who have the practical knowledge and share it with a researcher. A slight feeling of superiority was occasionally suggested to me implicitly, a superiority of those “who do” in contrast to those who merely “think or report about it”. Being an activist myself made me “one of us” or “one of those who are discriminated”. Being an academic made me “one of them”, somebody not concerned with the practices of real change but merely with the privilege to do l’art pour l’art. The interviews are, therefore, products of our respective attempts to explain our agendas, express solidarity, create trust, and establish a relationship of knowledge transfer. The interview tapes are, arguably, a product of social process between the interviewees and me as well as between their respective understanding of politics and my theoretical concerns and political desires. Wherever I quote them this aspect should be kept in mind. Additionally, the choice of quotations is a political process in itself, a choice I made in relation to my analytical concerns and questions. I utilised them as illustration, contradiction, destabilisation, and re-affirmation of those concerns and questions. Thus, I do not claim to have represented each individual and his or her work adequately.

Finally the issue of publication is not an easy one. None of the interviewees wanted to read a full transcript of the interviews, but all wished to see the specific quotations I would be using in my text if I wanted to quote them under their real name. All chose to be quoted under their real name. Not everybody liked the
quotations chosen and surely not all will feel represented adequately in this book. Theoretically informed research, however, needs to be critical, and if I was to censor everything my fellow activists might feel criticised about, there would be little to no point continuing a project such as this. On the other hand, I do not intend to ignore the concerns expressed or to engage in a less than respectful form of critical analysis.

In the course of this research I have subsequently utilised three primary devices to respond to the problematic of the researcher/researched relationship and the ethical and methodological problems any interview work always incurs. First I kept to my promise and sent the selected quotations to each individual. I did not promise to alter the words nor the choice of quotation, but I considered each question seriously and engaged in communication with the people concerned. I take full responsibility for the way each and every quotation is read and interpreted by me, acknowledging that there are many other ways of reading that same quotation and that any other interview process, for example another interviewer, might not have produced this very quotation at all. Second, I have kept a clear critical eye towards my own theoretical assumptions. I tried to be open at all times to the possibility that what I had considered problematic, such as, for example, unquestioned identity foundations, was in fact not claimed by activists in the first place. More than once I had to seriously ask questions about the importance of certain queer critiques in the actual political practices in Europe. This related partly to the applicability of a queer academic critique deeply embedded in US-American culture to the European cultural context. This context is one in which queer is largely unknown to activists who often struggle against different barriers than in the US and who recall a different history of the movement they grew up in. Additionally, I always assumed that the critical reflexivity of the people I interviewed was at least as poignant as my own and we both shared an equally deep sense of the importance of tackling discrimination, hatred, and exclusion at their very roots. Third, and most importantly, I clearly position myself on both sides of the researcher/researched dichotomy. I explicitly identify myself as both a critic and a critiqued, an analyst and an analysed in this book. What this means for my analysis will become clear in due course.