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

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Queer Theory and Political Practices

Social movements are collective efforts by socially and politically subordinated people to challenge the conditions and assumptions of their lives. Collective action becomes a "movement" when participants refuse to accept the boundaries of established institutional rules and routinized roles. (…) While traditional definitions usually focus on movement challenges to political structures, economic arrangements, and institutional rules, social movements—perhaps especially contemporary ones—also take on established cultural codes and social identities. (…) The seeming contradictoriness of movement activity (…) challenges not only political systems and cultural status quos but also many of our explanatory frameworks and analytic categories.

(Marcy Darnovsky, Barbara Epstein $&$ Richard Flacks 1995:vii)

This book takes the terms theory and politics as its starting point for inquiry. Since both are only seemingly self-evident, but actually very much undefined and unclear, their meanings are at best tentatively defined here. First I will concentrate on theory, more particularly queer theory and poststructuralism. This section is not intended as an exhaustive overview of the literature on queer theory. It rather tries to explicate the term and get a grip on the way in which the term is used in the following chapters. I will, then, move into defining and explaining the kinds of politics I investigate as political practices. The concept of meaning is engaged to understand how politics become effective practices. Both—queer theory and political practices—are deployed to understand certain aspects of political change and social movements, in this case the European lesbian and gay movements’ struggle for rights.

Queer Theory in Europe

Queer is an old and also quite recent phenomenon in l/g/b/t contexts. It has been a slang term for homosexuals while also being used as a form of homophobic abuse. Since about 1990 queer has become an umbrella term for all sorts of things: a substitute for gay and lesbian, a descriptive term for all unruly sexualities, the hip title, noun, verb, or adjective for everything in relation to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals, for example, journals, parties, demonstrations, politics. It is fundamentally connected to AIDS activism and has become the infamous name of the ACT UP spin-off QUEER NATION as well. While being all these things,
Queer has also turned into the brand name for numerous new academic theories and practices of writing. (Warner 1992:18) The queer community is, so to speak, an oxymoronic community of difference. (Duggan 1992:19) The term carries with it an excess of meanings, which it can never fully recognise nor fulfil. Alongside this abundance of meaning, it is also a profoundly Anglo-American term that has become common currency in many international l/g/b/t cultures without ever taking on board all its Anglo-American contents, while at the same time being enriched by new meanings in different language contexts.

Queer ranges from a new group identity to a form of marketing l/g/b/t events to a radically different form of political activism or to a body of highly theoretical academic writing. By the end of the decade, it seems as if the layers of complication in attempting to define queer as a political or a theoretical concept will not end; the more the term spreads, the more it becomes something, the less anybody can define it. However, for the sake of clarity, the usage of the term queer in an academic context should not be left unexplained. Queer is only used in this book to demarcate a specific form of theoretical thinking that has political implications. It is not used to describe an identity, a subculture, or a specific form of radical activism. The latter is not my subject of investigation for reasons I explained in the introduction and for reasons to which I will return later in this chapter. The former two I simply do not subscribe to for several reasons.

David Halperin summarised the aspect of queer identity in the following way: “There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers, it is an identity without an essence”. (Halperin 1995:62) I would maintain, however, that queer as an identity makes little sense whatsoever, even if queer is understood to reach far beyond gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities. In common language use throughout Europe, queer has become a substitute term for gay and lesbian, and sometimes it functions as the umbrella term for the l/g/b/t connection. While I firmly believe in the connection between gay and lesbian issues and transgender issues, I see no need to assign a new identity to that connection. A new identity suggests a form of sameness that has already been destabilised for gay men or lesbians as a group from the vantage point of gender, race, class, or culture. Experience in Europe shows that the label queer as an identity more often than not only functions as a substitute for gay. Used in that way it marginalises lesbians once again, and does not even consider bisexuals or transgender people, nor is it capable of addressing the intersections among homosexuality, gender, race, and class. While I hesitantly and with a constant sense of trouble continue to use the terms gay men and lesbians throughout this book—since they continuously carry political relevancy in the context under investigation here—I never use queer as an identification for a group of people.

As for the theoretical aspect of queer, Michael Warner once called queer theory “a largely intuitive and half-articulate theory” (Warner 1992:19) that, for him and

different European countries. Queer Nation was a split-off group that formed itself, in the US only, in response to the marginalisation of gay men in ACT-UP.
Lauren Berlant, barely existed in 1995. (Berlant & Warner 1995:343) Indeed, the first time it was used academically was in 1991 by Teresa de Lauretis in the infamous issue of Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. There, she (1991:iii) defined queer as “an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive and yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representation while insisting on its material and historical specificity.” The most common denominator of queer theory since then is its transgressive moment in relation to regimes of the normal and its insistence on destabilising all seemingly natural categories of sex and gender, such as fixed homosexual identities or biological gender identities. But that is probably already all that has been agreed upon in the literature around queer theory.31 According to Eric Savoy (1994:133) queer theory is a portable toolbox that contains a well-known array of binarised category explosives. Moreover, queer labels are a performative disruption of the very concept of identity itself. Overall, I find Linda Nicholson’s and Steven Seidman’s (1995:18) description of queer theory a useful summary:

queer theory shifts the center of analysis from viewing homosexuality as a minority identity to a cultural figure. The hetero/homo binary is imagined, parallel to the masculine/feminine trope, as a symbolic code structured into the texts of daily life, from popular culture.... to disciplinary knowledges, law, therapeutic practices, criminal justice, and state policies. It frames the way we know and organize personal and social experience, with the effect of reproducing heteronormativity. Queer theory aims to expose the operation of the hetero/homo code in the center of society and to contribute to destabilizing its operation.

Concepts of queer, thus, are at their best where they defy definition and where they concentrate on disruptions of the normal—the normal being male, heterosexual, white, bourgeois, but also normal business in the academy or taken-for-granted gay and lesbian identity politics. The way queer theory is used in this book is no summary, nor is it exhaustive in all aspects of queer terminology, nor indeed in itself an attempt to find proper answers and objects of research or dissolve all objections. Queer theory has no stable referential content and pragmatic force. Wanting to demarcate queer theory entirely from any of its many meanings would be an attempt to normalise and define something that destroys itself in definition. And as Judith Butler (1994:21) pointedly remarked in this respect, “normalising the queer would be, after all, its sad finish”. However, I do adhere to a set of assumptions that can be called queer theory. While reading political texts through a queer-theoretical glass, I follow Seidman and Nicholson’s path of assuming gender and sexuality to be a binary, hierarchised structure firmly embedded in European political orders. In fact, gender and sexuality are assumed to be a decisive frame of all political orders

under investigation here. Although these assumptions have been thoroughly argued by feminist researchers over decades, they are not self-evident to the extent that they need no clarification in this context.

Provisionally, queer theory could be characterised as framed by poststructuralism, or postmodernism. As such, it works from the vantage point of discourse as the meaning-creating system, which pre-exists and, consequently, shapes and signifies the formation of subject positions, identity, and, indeed, reality. Queer theory, thus, maps an unstable, non-essentialist, non-transparent or -coherent, and anti-humanist understanding of sexuality and gender identity. Queer theory is fundamentally a critique of identity. Accordingly, queer as a theory emerged out of “access to the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation”. (Jagose 1996:77)

Poststructuralism itself is not a monolithic bloc or a fixed school of thought either, but a re-definable and fluid set of understandings, a practice and process of theorising.

Rather, 'post-structuralism' indicates a field of critical practices that cannot be totalized and that, therefore, interrogates the formative and exclusionary power of dis-course in the construction of sexual difference. This interrogation does not take for granted the meanings of any terms or analytic categories, including its own. ...Poststructuralism is not, strictly speaking, a position, but rather a critical interrogation of the exclusionary operations by which 'positions' are established. (Butler & Scott 1992:xiii/xiv)

Consequently, poststructuralist critiques are not new in themselves, they draw on what has been discursively produced about identities. They, thus, form an identity critique in the sense of destabilising the one most naturalised cultural category each of us inhabits: the sense of oneself as being something, belonging to a certain defined group, in fact, the very sense of human existence as something. And that something is in its primary principle male or female, gender is the first category each human is assigned at birth. Gender is very obviously a central mark of being human.

While certain identities remain central, it is their naturalness that is brought into question. Queer theory emphasises that there is no such thing as an universal identity. According to Madan Sarup (1996:73), every person's identity is a site of struggle between conflicting discourses. He maintains that “discourses emerge and function as a means of struggle, and, at the same time, a series of controls master and constrain discourses. And in the struggle of discourses, not only words change their meanings, but identities also.” Sarup draws—as does queer theory in general—on a Foucauldian concept of discourse that led to the disruption of natural, universal identities. Joan Scott summarised this concept of discourse as

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32 Wherever that is not possible—such as in the case of intersexuels—clear gender assignment is forced into existence through mutilating operations and compulsory hormone treatment in all European countries.
... any system—strictly verbal or other—through which meaning is constructed and cultural practices organized and by which accordingly, people represent and understand their world, including who they are and how they relate to others. (Scott 1988:254)

According to Scott, the analysis of discourse then provides a starting point for conceptualising how social relations are understood, how they work, how they are institutionalised and how collective identities are established. This is an understanding of discourse as the fundamental place in which social relations are formed, defined, and contested. Individual subjectivity and identity are located and constructed in culturally, socially, and historically specific ways in discourse.

Individuals do not create or contest meaning as unified, autonomous subjects from an essential human core, but always from already being positioned in several discourses. This does not mean that discourses are constructed outside of actual relations and then placed on passive individuals. The meanings constructed by discourses are in fact created, used, and contested by all participants who are in different ways located in them. Even members of strongly marginalised groups are not simply passive recipients of a dominant discursive meaning about them. In fact, queer challenges the story of marginalisation as a weak trope even if it produces a story of struggle and oppression itself. Queer theory moves instead into the central production site of cultures and asserts centrality for the queer subject.33

However, this does not mean that all individuals have the same access to influencing the establishment of meanings that become dominant. For gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people it is crucial to understand that, while we actively participate in the constitution of discursive meaning, the organisation of social relations extends beyond individuals. Therefore, while, for example, white women are actively involved in relations and practices, their interpretation of events has not got the same power of influence for creating dominant meaning as white men's. And further, the discrepancies in access to social space and power do not always provide the possibilities for creating non-dominant interpretations in the first place. This understanding is based, yet again, on the Foucauldian concept of power. According to David Evans (1993:11) Foucault's concept of power is

an all pervasive, normative, and positive presence, internalised by and thus creating, the subject. Indeed, the subject seems not to exist outside of immanent patterns of normative knowledge derived from language, objects and practices, i.e. discourses. 'Subjectivity' in the Foucauldian sense is always discursive, it refers to general subject positions, conceived as empty spaces or functions occupied by particular individuals in the pronouncement of specific statements. We are what we learn, internalise and reproduce as knowledge and the language through which it is understood. We are subjects of the power immanently installed in that knowledge.

33 Although—if one looks at this claim a bit closer—slogans such as “we are here, we are queer and we designed everything you are wearing” is probably less a belief than a hope for centrality.
As Michel Foucault elaborated extensively in his *History of Sexuality, The Archaeology of Knowledge, and Discipline and Punish* his theory of power was simultaneously a definition of how the subject comes into being as, foremost, a sexual subject, who considers sexuality the most essential, but hidden secret of its being. According to Foucault (1980:154), European history shows how the sexual subject of modern societies was constructed out of an obsessive pursuit of ever greater knowledge about the subject’s innermost selves—it's bio-power—a secret to be discovered everywhere. Gender and sexuality became the most pervasive form of identification in modern regimes, a fact which—ironically—apparently evades discursive interpretation through its stringent claim to eternal truth. The history of sexuality, in consequence, became a subject of academic research, largely through the circulation of Foucault’s work by feminists and gay and lesbian authors. (Duggan 1992:22) It is the insight into the centrality of sexuality for the creation of subjectivity that makes queer theory challenge “the regime of sexuality itself, that is, the knowledges that construct the self as sexual and that assume heterosexuality and homosexuality as categories marking the truth of sexual selves.” (Seidman 1996:12) The same insight is the reason why “queer theory aspires to transform homosexual theory into a general social theory or one standpoint from which to analyze social dynamics.” (Seidman 1996:13)

This aspiration is intended as a critical intervention into heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is a central term within queer theory.34 It is based upon understanding sexuality as more than just the effect of cultural or discursive practice or merely the product of ideology or institutions. Rather sexuality is “a regulatory apparatus that spans the organization of social life in the modern world and that works in concert with other social totalities—capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism”. (Hennessy 1995:70) As a regulatory apparatus, sexuality is not universal and equally valued in all its expressions, but it functionalises heterosexuality to occupy the centre of human sexuality and gender relations. Through thematising heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality, queer theory uncovers the institutional powers of certain discourses that organise more than just the sexual. (Genshel 1996:528) According to Corinna Genshel (1996:529), queer analysis is directed against those systems of thought and those institutions which insist on the naturalness, the binding nature, and the pre-condition of heterosexuality, just as feminists have shown how terms such as morality, rationality or the public sphere are deeply dependent on gender. Thus, it is the normative ordering force of (hetero)sexuality which comes under critique, not practices of heterosexuality per se. This marks queer theory’s distance from any notions of essential gayness or lesbianism.

Some of the best research in gender and sexuality has demonstrated how normative discourses interpellate individuals into hegemonic social orders that produce the subjects of gender and the trajectory of their desire. These studies show how socially mediated discursive technologies inlay into psyche and corporeal reality

34 Heteronormativity is discussed at length in Chapter Eight.
the structures of corporeal rules—such as proper and improper gender identity—and the linguistic features that form a social register, which often presents the only social space for speech. The rules and features of human identity—foremost gender, sexuality, and race—compose the personal grammar that every subject has, and this grammar, unperceived, migrates with persons as they enter and transgress public and intimate spheres, orienting their expectations and demands. Rights struggles are a form of public demand in which the rules of gender and sexuality are prominent and easily traceable. It is one of the reasons that traditional rights and lobby politics make such suitable material for tracing the conditions and the nature of the political (sexual) subject endowed with human rights in European democracies.

Discourses compete with each other for the authority to establish dominant meanings or dominant forms of subjectivity, and, consequently, to present themselves as truthful, proven knowledge. Power imbalances in dichotomies such as male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual are symptoms of a continuing struggle for dominance. They rest on establishing oppositions and exclusions. However, the existence of dominant discourses always include the existence of non-dominant discourses that constantly challenge and contest what is dominant knowledge. Therefore, there are always different meanings or subject positions available at any given time. The institutionalisation of heterosexuality as the only sexuality must, thus, logically always already fail, as it needs to create its own exclusions to maintain itself. Politically speaking, however, the failure of logical coherence does not defuse patterns and relations of power which hold political regimes together. Even though gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people are excluded from centres of cultural production, they are not free to invent their own meanings independent from existing social relations. (Walkowitz et.al. 1989:30) They are, moreover, constantly participating in the active construction of dominant and contested meanings.

Hence, the examination of competing political discourses and of particular individuals' and groups' participation in the creation, affirmation, or contestation of actual social and material relations on the official political stage, is an investigation into the very conditions of the social and the political per se. According to a queer approach, it is the task of political activism to potentially utilise such theoretical examination to make the incoherence of the dominant order speakable, known and eventually intolerable, so that change can begin. Queer theory always has an intrinsic political aspect to itself. According to Mark Blasius (1998:668) queer theory is “an active engagement through thought with the vicissitudes of lived experience—theory, to paraphrase Nietzsche, is an expression of a will to power—rather than solely commentary on text.”

There is no high queer theory whose conditions remain stable while politics are analysed through it. Rather the combination of the terms queer and theory in academia during the last 10 years, expresses a clear will to academic power, renders

35 This line of thought is one of the fundamental arguments Judith Butler made in Gender Trouble (1990).
central what is deemed marginal and questions the stability of knowledge productions that are contained in the normative binary gender order. This explains again why queer theory is a project of destabilisation, of questioning and of unmasking the regimes of the normal rather than the heterosexual without claiming to stand objectively outside. That project includes normal business in what counts as academic theory. (Warner 1992:18)

Thus, queer theory cannot remain aloof from that which it observes. The sovereign epistemic agent, i.e. the theorist, cannot assume an autonomous position as a master of the social, cultural, economic, or political relations theoretically analysed. Although queer theory has an ambiguous relationship to gay and lesbian activism at the best of times, it roots itself firmly in a political vision of change and challenge to the status quo. Queer theory produces knowledge that is central to living. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1995:348) answered the “sixty-four thousand dollar” question about what queer theory teaches us with respect to political change in exactly that vein:

Sometimes the question of what queer theory teaches us about x is not about politics in the usual sense but about personal survival. Like feminist, African-American, Latina/Latino, and other minority projects, queer work strikes its readers as knowledge central to living.

Queer theory cannot be thought without a connection to the world outside of theory—theory and the political form an inseparable bond, although it is precisely that bond which is questioned the most by critics of queer theory.

This bond requests the acknowledgement that queer theory has arisen at a specific time in a specific cultural and political location of the United States of America. To target queer theories’ critiques precisely and fairly in an European transnational context, the specific locations of European gay and lesbian politics are

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36 There exists an extensive body of literature on the critique of queer theory. The oppositions between queer theory and its critiques are discussed in Chapter Three.

37 John D’Emilio (1983) argues that US gay politics were overwhelmingly oriented to civil rights with the aim of social assimilation. The predominance of this political strategy is summarised aptly by Steven Epstein (1999:32):

On the one hand, particularities of the United States have tended to favor the development of, and grant visibility and legitimacy to, one kind of lesbian and gay politics in the very midst of diversity: the formation of durable organizations and community groups that promote a liberal agenda of equal rights and inclusion, premised on a conception of gay men and lesbians as a clearly demarcated social group with a fixed, ethniclike (sic) identity.

Epstein mentions three debates which were initiated in the US to counter such an approach to gay and lesbian politics: debates of identity and difference, debates of desire, and public/private debates. (Epstein 1999:32/33) Queer theory as academic discussion heavily participates in these debates. Queer critiques, according to Epstein (1999:64), continue to act in the US context as a reminder that, for many, the goal of the politics of sexuality was not assimilation but confrontation and as evidence that the mainstream lesbian and gay rights movement, despite or because of its attempt to present itself as “the gay and lesbian movement”, was incapable of aggregating the diverse interests of all those on behalf of whom it purported to speak.
to be taken into consideration. The most important difference is the dominance of the human rights discourse in European political discourse. Chapter Four is entirely dedicated to an analysis of human rights discourse. Yet, beyond paying attention to the specificity of human rights argumentation queer theory needs to slightly calibrate itself in the encounter with a few other cultural and historical conditions of gay and lesbian politics, for example, the connection to leftist political culture, the lack of a dominant Christian Right, the different AIDS history and the transnational character of national difference in Europe. None of these differences is as central as the dominance of the human rights discourse. Yet, to complicate the way in which queer theoretical critique is formulated in the European context, these differences need to be acknowledged.

European movements for equality and social justice, whether they are about women or sexual minorities, have a strong history of alliances and loyalties with leftist ideologies. (Hekma et al. 1995:31) The fact that most European countries have a parliamentary system of proportional representation which includes left-wing political representation provides a different political culture compared to the US. This includes, for example, the reduced impact of the anti-communism hysteria the US experienced after World War II. Being left and socialist did not and does not imply a total marginalisation of oneself in political and economic life. It is potentially part of the legitimate political landscape and the diversity of left-wing cultures provided a differentiated home for differentiated forms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender politics. The alliances with left-wing movements and the non-existence of a black civil rights movement account for a different history in modelling lesbian and gay liberation: different in the sense that there is a lesser need to unify one movement with one form of strategy. The different degrees of assimilation or of identity politics can find advocates within a part of the mainstream political landscape. The connection between the Left and issues of gender and sexuality is not unproblematic, but it is a decisive factor that shapes European gay and lesbian political culture.38

Additionally the polarisation of gay and lesbian movements into an assimilationist wing and a more radical left-wing—each trying to focus on fighting the Christian Right’s backlash in different ways (Epstein 1999:64-76)—has not occurred in Europe to the same extent as in the US.39 The absence of the Christian Right backlash makes for a very important difference in the discourse of survival, threat, and rights in Western Europe in general. The late 1990s and the early 2000s sparked a few significant political debates about gay and lesbian partnership rights and in

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39 This statement is generalised. In Britain, for example, OutRage as a more radical, queer organisation was partly founded to counter Stonewall’s assimilationist tendencies. Particularly in Germany, lesbian groups explicitly counter politics of inclusion that are said to be perpetuated by the Lesben und Schwulenverband Deutschland (LSVD). For reasons of this opposition, very few lesbians responded, in early 1999, to the call for broadening the SVD into LSVD as a joint national organisation.
some countries—for example in Germany and in France—conservatives and Catholics staged major homophobic campaigns. Yet, sexuality does not carry the same general political significance as in the US—sex and sexuality lack the central significance in everyday politics that the Monica Lewinsky affair brought to the forefront so vividly. Even if gay and lesbian partnership rights spark homophobic campaigns, these campaigns are nothing compared to the open xenophobia displayed by politicians standing anywhere right from the very left. Multiculturalism and access to European citizenship is likely to be the most central rally cry of everyday political debate throughout Western Europe. Whereas queer critiques reflect the polarisation into two radically different responses to the political needs in countering the Christian Right backlash, the absence of the Christian Right backlash in Western Europe can potentially deprive the queer critiques of some of their legibility.

Some of queer theory’s lack of legibility in the European context is also due to the difference in the history of the AIDS crisis. Queer theory and politics are strongly rooted in the specific US American setting of the AIDS crisis. (Genschel 1997:88-90) Questions of the connection between race, homophobia and public health care suddenly became an issue that concerned white gay men. The deep-rooted critique of normative structures that underlie different forms of exclusion and marginalisation was a new and much needed insight which the AIDS crisis provoked. The social and historical implication of the AIDS epidemic were, however, slightly different in Europe. Neither is the anti-gay backlash in relation to the AIDS entirely comparable—since it was never as harsh as the anti-gay response of the US government—nor were the consequences of the AIDS experience in European welfare and interventionist systems the same. (Annets & Thompson 1992:228-231) The existence of public health care systems all over Europe, for example, made a significant difference to the way the shock of AIDS was experienced. Discussion of health care, sexual politics, and welfare ideologies were not new to gay and lesbian activists in Europe, but were a fairly well rehearsed ground in most European countries. The sense of newness that queer carried in the US, in its move to politicise an epidemic, is not shared in the same way by gay men and lesbians in Europe.41

40 The generalisation of this statement cannot so easily be conferred onto the Eastern and south-eastern European context in which religiously marked national identities are re-erected. In some places such as Romania and Poland, sexuality plays a more open role in political discourse. The economic poverty and zest of these countries to enter the EU often makes Eastern European people themselves the target of the ethnic exclusion countries such as Germany promote so heavily.

41 This is admittedly a generalisation again that only explains certain responses to queer, but does not do justice to the significant difference in the national settings with regard to the AIDS crisis. Different European countries produced very different levels of politicisation with regard to AIDS. French and Spanish movements, for example, had to encounter more homophobia than the Netherlands and, therefore, politicised their responses in a stronger way. See for an elaboration on this comparison Jan Willem Duyvendak (1996). Spain and France had chapters of ACT-UP strongly modelled on the radical politics of ACT-UP in the US. See for further analysis in the case of Spain Ricardo Llamas &
Minoritising approaches have been valuable in legitimising homosexuality and in gaining some rights of recognition not only in the US (Seidman & Nicholson 1995:17), but also in the European context. (Adam, Duyvendak & Krouwel 1999:7) They served as symbolic resources for the successful efforts in community-building all over the world in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. (1999:1-2) Yet, while for the US context the quasi-ethnic or cultural minority became pivotal (Epstein 1999:32), the discourses deployed for rights in each European national context added their own historical trajectory for the mobilisation of l/g/b/t movements. Thus, when approaching Europe as a cultural and political context, one has to talk about the intricate connections of discourses of national difference and of transnational solidarity or identity.

A few interesting examples of particularities can be named. Firstly, France. forced activists to speak a language of egalitarianism rather than minority, since strong discourses of nationality—and the importance of being French first—hinder the articulation of gay identity as distinct minority.42 Secondly, some national European movements have never depended much on identity. This is particularly the case within lesbian activism, for lesbian activism across Europe has a strong and long history of questioning clear identifications to a much higher degree than gay male activism has. (Llamas and Vila 1999) Thirdly, northern European countries in particular experienced an early separation of commercial subculture and the political movement. (Duyvendak 1996:433) There is, therefore, more of a split between what seems to be apolitical culture and formalised movement. (Adam, Duyvendak, & Krouwel 1998:9) Fourthly, in the Southern European context as well as in the Eastern European context desire and non-politicised identities overall dominate the subcultures—as far as they can find public space to exist—and resemble aspects of ‘Western’ communities. (1998:9) However, looking closer at the specific post-communist setting one can see significant diversity again. In Romania the argument of minority and ethnicity is the only available and politically successful discourse on gay and lesbian identity. (Long 1999:245/246) The Czech Republic employs citizenship and reference to the parliamentary structure of the state as its discourse. (1999:249/250) Hungary displays a strange combination of granting legal rights to a weak movement that is denied official recognition (1999:253), whereas in Poland, rights discourses connect to a long national history of tolerance and democracy.43

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Fefa Vial (1999) and in the case of France Olivier Fillieule & Jan Willem Duyvendak (1999). The Dutch government supported AIDS prevention by the gay community financially from the beginning and, thus, produced a climate of national consent that is unmatched in the world. See Judith Schuyf & André Krouwel (1999) as well as Jan Willem Duyvendak (1996) for further elaboration.

42 This condition accounts for a specifically strong connection between French nationalism, xenophobia, and homophobia. See Olivier Fillieule & Jan Willem Duyvendak (1999:189/190) as well as Steven Seidman (1995) for further elaboration.

43 Scott Long (1999:253) qualifies his description of the Hungarian situation by explaining that rights of common law partnership rained on the gay and lesbian movement from above, while gay and lesbian organisations were long denied official registration or acknowledgement.
It is a truism to state that gay and lesbian political practices in Europe depend on the cultural and regional differences in such things as the meaning of sexuality, sex-gender systems, the development of civil society, and organised religion. What is of interest for the pan-European context, however, are the ways in which “transnational diffusion is an important facilitating condition” (Adam, Duyvendak & Krouweil 1998:24) for the development of a sense of identifiable European gay and lesbian politics, which ILGA-Europe purports to exist in its European rhetoric.

Queer theory’s attention to cultural specificity and the precise workings of structural marginalisation makes it a powerful tool for analysis as long as it indeed becomes more legible for European activists and their particular movement histories. Yet, since queer theory demands that its practitioners position themselves clearly with respect to their object of investigation—a stance queer theory adopted from feminist methodology—there is nothing that prevents changes of focus. There is no one and only valid form of queer theory.

Queer theory demands from its practitioners a self-understanding that is constituted at the intersection of an intersubjective understanding of the hegemony of social reality and an intersubjective understanding of oneself. (Bal 1991:31) Yet, the obvious partiality of all participants involved—from the analyst to the analysed to the reader of the analysis and the representatives of political institutions and courts—is a crucial insight that can be gained from queer analysis and from political practices for rights. What queer theory brings into the focus of critique is what a careful interpretation of political practices could well reveal by itself. Queer theory’s insights are to some extent only the result of problems which arose within the realm of the political before anybody coined the term queer. Queer theory’s political ambitions and its connections between theory and its subject of analysis, make it a critical theory according to four characteristics Mieke Bal (1991:35) identified.

Firstly, in queer theory—as in critical theory—the subject is seriously studied, situated, and made explicit. Secondly, all action—whether that be theoretical analysis or activism—is clearly oriented by interests and this interest is neither denied nor hidden behind seeming impartiality and academic objectivity. Thirdly, queer theory is normative. Not as a set of normative propositions and a normative corpus of analysis, but “by describing its corpus by means of definitional concepts” and allowing, thus, “for a normative analysis of the corpus”. (Bal 1991:35) Queer theory derives its norms explicitly from systematic reflection of an epistemological order and describes its corpus of analysis through definitional concepts such as heteronormativity. It renders itself plausible and transmissible as a critical tool through precise interdisciplinary methodologies (Bal 1991:27) and becomes, fourthly, at different stages comparative, so as to allow disciplinary and political challenge. As a critical theory, queer theory has—just as its sisters feminism and postcolonial theory—a clear commitment to politics and change, an anti-hegemonic and anti-oppression stance. (Weston 1998:145) Yet, despite professing to have the political at
its core, queer theory more often than not fails to define exactly what politics or the political mean.

**Political Practices**

Politics and the political are an aporia. (Hark 1996:144) We discuss politics, speak about political movements, of political rights or minority politics without demarcating the political differences the term politics or the political entails. Contemporary western nomenclature commonly derives *politics* from the Greek *polis* and *politeia*, emphasising the human capacity to constitute a particular mode of communal life through generating boundaries, rules, morality, habits, institutions, and law. It emphasises the human capacity to actively produce an order, a world of meaning that results in institutions, social control and processes of change. The term politics also acknowledges the existence of power, the necessity to maintain it and disperse it, circulate it, and assess its effects. It, thus, clearly draws on human agency.

Departing from this conception, two aspects have to be added to the concept of the political when considering a poststructuralist mode of thinking: politics are also a) discursive and b) a performative way of producing meaning. The former is clearer than the latter in this respect. A discursive understanding of politics emphasises its dependency on language as the site at which politics, as practice, are possible in the first place, created, challenged and subsequently enacted. All meaning attached to politics or to the political is necessarily discursive. This means that discourses are constructive of reality, of the social, political, economic, and legal order we live in. This view does not deny any extra-discursive material reality. Rather it suggests that the meanings we attribute to that which we perceive to be real are discursively constructing that reality—given that we cannot interpret reality outside of meaning-constructing discursive frameworks.

With respect to the realm of the political, the performative—a term introduced in the philosophy of language by J. L. Austin but strongly associated with Judith Butler's philosophy of gender—is to be distinguished from representation, which presents another aspect of the political. To represent homosexuals as an identity group or as people with a common life-style choice—which has political consequences and is, thus, worthy of the formation of a political movement—is often understood to be at the centre of lesbian and gay politics. Representational claims are deeply problematic in that they pretend to adequately mirror a reality that is true for all members of the group, as if they are speaking for someone. Representation is a part of the political practices I analyse in this book and it has been critiqued substantially before. However, it is the aspect of performative meaning production

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44 Butler uses the word performative to describe how the body provides a surface upon which various acts and gestures accrue gendered meanings. What she, thus, calls corporeal signification reveals that gender does not appeal to an ontological essence granted by nature. Rather the belief in the naturalness is an illusion that depends on performative acts. (Butler 1990:136)
in political practices that is the site of interest for the analytical definition of political practices here.

Political practices aim to take part in the definition of legal, social, and economic relations. They do so by producing meaning about a certain situation they wish to change or maintain or find solutions for. Political practices are an interpretative act. They claim to know what the problem is, what causes it and how it can be mended. Thus, they need to be culturally and politically intelligible, the meaning they produce needs to be understandable. The requirement of intelligibility in this sense does not mean that no new meaning can be produced. It does imply that any new meaning needs to be fitted to the political institution and the political discourse in which it is presented.

Judith Butler defines performativity as citationality. (1993:12-16) Something is cited and re-cited as stemming from the seemingly natural origin, which in fact never existed, but is an invention of the process of citation. Political practices need to participate in citing or reiterating the norms or the sets of norms that define the political realm and legal or moral orders from which that realm gains its existential authority. These regulatory orders are not timeless structures, but historical and revisable forms of intelligibility. Speaking about a group in that sense is not to be understood as a theatrical performance, but as an derivative action, an action that cites the conditions of authority to speak about that group. Within the concept of the performative, politics are understood as reiterative and citational practices that are strictly connected to power and not in any external relation to the oppositions of power in our societies. Strategies of power and who gets what, when, and how are, thus, still central to this concept of politics.

Such a concept of politics could surely contain manifold political practices. Queer theory would suggest political practices, for example, at the level of styles, of visible disruptions of normality, of civil disobedience, or of utterances that perform the marginal, such as displaying unclear gender appearances. Why then analyse a purely traditional form of political lobby practice? Why analyse court judgements, EU directives, or parliamentary resolutions which often only re-establish heteronormative foundations of social, political, legal, and economic structures? Additionally to what I have said in the introduction, the answer to this question relates to desire as a political category: the desire for rights and the never ending fascination terms such as equality carry even for those consciously identified queer. Accepting legal equality as true equality will not do; but ignoring the desire for legal equality will not do either.

45 Butler's context here is gender and the naturalness of bodies as gendered bodies.
46 This approach would include the consequences of Roland Barthes' (1986) notion of the death of the author. The political activist is not the fully intentional producer of a political practice or a text, but the practice or the text has a life of its own and the process of reading a political action is more important than the intentions of the authors.
Certain forms of political practice set themselves up for dominance and, in the popular conception of politics, are accepted uncritically as politics per se. Their narration is the canon of politics and meaning about the political is always in one way or another mirrored against that canon. Radical queer politics, for example, often publicise themselves as explicit non-participation in the traditional political canon and, thereby, once more cite it as dominant. Government lobby politics form the main focus of the queer critiques, which, in turn, renders them central within the queer vein of thought yet again. For reasons of hegemonic power, government politics, lobbying, law reforms and anti-discrimination legislation remain the focal point for the formation of most organisations that root themselves in a movement. Critical as that might be, it still is worth analysing since the conditions of these gay and lesbian politics need to be exposed in order to ultimately make critical political practice a powerful tool of changing hegemonic orders. Maintaining sight of the centrality of power relations in politics is made possible, I would argue, by a deployment of the concept of meaning for the definition of political practices.

If political practices are performative ways to produce meaning, then meaning as a concept gains centrality for the political. The biology of meaning, to borrow Jerome Bruner’s term, is a foundational aspect of the political. (1990:69) Bruner derives the human capacity to communal life from the capacity to produce meaning and the capacity of the child to learn the language of meaning production. Meaning production is a narrative process and it needs human action, a sequential order, reference to the canonical, and something like a narrator. (1990:77) This narrative process is strongly demarcated by the tool kits of culture that equip us with the traditions of telling and interpreting. Logos, narrative, and cultural practice are inseparable. (1990:80/81) In short, “a right story is one that connects your version through mitigation with the canonical version”. (1990:86) Children learn that the degree to which a story is convincing is the degree to which they master the canonical and they learn how to deceive in order make their stories fit. The clue of Bruner’s biology of meaning is that our sense of the canonical or the normative is nourished in narrative, but the same accounts for the breach and the exception. This means that deviance, the non-fitting aspect of a story is the central moment that—according to Bruner—sparks narrative. It is the only thing that actually produces new meaning in its attempt to become the new canonical. And it is ultimately the capacity to see and recognise the non-canonical that makes us “fit for culture”. (1990:97)

Transporting Bruner’s fitness for culture into a fitness for politics would imply that l/g/b/t lobby practices contain on the one hand an advantageous point of departure in that they are to some extent necessarily deviant. The protection of

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47 He (1990:75) illustrates this via the language development of infants and young children, a learning process that eventually enables them to master and manage meaning production.

48 There is an amusing implication hidden in Bruner’s argument here, which is the idea that the canonical arises out of learning how to lie. For Umberto Eco (1976:10), in fact, this capacity to lie defines signs.
homosexual rights as human rights, for example, clashes with some of the fundamental discourses on humanness that define human sexuality as heterosexual normality. On the other hand, l/g/b/t lobby practices need to master the politically dominant discourse so that they remain intelligible within the political institution that grants rights, such as courts or parliaments. The point of deviance is, thus, purposely masked in a narration that fits the right story of, for example, human rights. In consequence, any political practice contains reiteration and rupture of norms at the same time.

The production of meaning in political practices is, therefore, not simple. It is more than an author’s or a group of authors’ intentional argument for challenge and change. The political text—written document and oral testimony—produces meaning on several plural levels. In relation to the critique of identity and politics of representation central to queer theory this insight has significant consequences. While, for example, the political act does not necessarily need to claim a pre-existing identity or—to say it with Nietzsche—while acknowledging that the deed creates the doer, the claim to an authority to speak more often than not seems to need an identity upon which it rests. ILGA-Europe, in this case, can never—and I doubt it would even want to—represent the European movement. But a movement is claimed to exist in lobby politics insofar as individual people build their political practices upon a performance of identity that creates the fantasy of commonality and subsequent solidarity with many others. A fantasy that is by no means unreal, but that can never fulfil its own promise of sufficiently describing the lived experiences of many. The complexity and contradictions with regard to identity as political tool evident in lobby documents and personal accounts are, however, not simply naïve or essentialist.

On the one hand, there are always dangerous aspects to political representation. Mainly, the claim to speak on behalf of a group, which is assumed to be homogenous for the purpose of legal recognition, is normatising. It implies that there is a political progress from which all could benefit. This is illusionary given the huge diversity of life-styles and intricate connections between many exclusionary identification factors, such as gender(identify), class, age, or race among ILGA-Europe’s constituency. In order to be representable, a group has to be homogenised as an abstract totality that wants rights and fits the conditions of those rights. Any political practice that speaks of a group is, by definition, reductive of diversity and potentially normative.

On the other hand, the outcome of identity politics is not a given. Unexamined assumptions about what activists actually believe can prove to be an academic fallacy. The arguments used in documents and oral statements towards rights-granting institutions are clearly a deployment of tactics, a political strategy. They do not present the complex nature of sexual identities that, for example, all my interviewed activists were aware of and upon which they create a sense of community among each other. In the practices of politics, the term identity is, in
general, specific to describing a group, however phantasmatic those commonalities might be. Identity is in that respect more often linked to minority and group commonalities than to subjectivity or psychic constitution, even though that is rarely clarified and often formulated ambiguously. As a political strategy, certain deployments of identity could address the need for structural social change beyond rights for a homogenised minority. What is significant in that is the relationship any concept of identity has to the political discourse in which it is employed. In the human rights discourse, for example, there remains a need to deploy an identity that can be ascribed rights by virtue of that identity being considered human and therefore having an intrinsic value worthy of protection. (Offord 1999a:281)

Through understanding politics as a citational and performative production of meaning, contradictory aspects of single political actions or texts can be conceptualised. Such understanding positions strategies of power and the crucial reality of who gets what, when, and how as an intrinsic aspect of the meanings that political practices are capable of producing.

This understanding of meaning is also the reason why I prefer to speak of political practices in this book rather than simply politics. I wish to emphasise the political realm as a space in which discursivity and the performative production of meaning plays a role. Handling terminology in this way will help to escape a total negation of representational politics as adequate, fair, or just to the reality of lived sexual and gender lifestyles which the queer critiques seem to ultimately suggest. Understood as practices, politics permanently expose their contingency and, thus, make space for the existence of realities that do not fit neatly into identity categories prescribed by the regime of the heteronormative gender binary. Or as Sabine Hark formulates:

'A politics of politics'... would be a politics conscious of its own contingency and not making it disappear, and would in its creation of reality leave room for other creations of reality. (Hark 1996:146, translation mine)

Political practices can be consciously contingent when they are also understood as a set of argumentative practices. The tool and strategy of producing meaning is an argument. Every political practice contains an argument for or against something and, in general, every political practice is oriented towards achieving something. Part of what is involved in analysing what activists mean by what they say or write is not just a review of the expressed content but a recognition of what implicit discourses they are drawing on in order to say something by means of argumentation structure. Lobby documents, court judgements, or parliamentary texts are based on the assumption that political and legal processes are democratic and adhere to an ideal of communication in which all participants are seen as rational agents who are sincerely interested in resolving an argument and in accepting mediation. Political argumentation is in its ideal built on seeking resolution not mere acquiescence or settlement. The political text is employed to create a social problem-solving process via argumentation, it becomes the means by which controlled change is democratically institutionalised. A discourse of ideal political process is, thus, one of the
discourses ILGA-Europe's political practices implicitly draw upon. Many others will be traced in the course of this book.

Frans van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, Sally Jackson, and Scott Jacobs (1993) developed a theory of argumentation suitable for explaining the ideal political process to which rights politics in Europe implicitly adhere. Van Eemeren et. al. firmly maintain that the structure of argumentation, the requirements of justification, and the need for argumentation itself are all adapted to the contexts in which opposition, objections, doubts, and counterclaims arise. (1993:14) Argumentation is, thus, functionalised. Yet, it is also externalised—distinguishing reasoning and argumentation—socialised—as an interactive not an individual process—and dialectified—the conditions under which rational judgement can take place are taken into account. (1993:11-15) A speech act of argumentation pursues a communicative aspect aimed at achieving an interactional effect of accepting. (1993:55) The commitment to being legible within the traditions of certain political institutions can, thus, be assumed to be a strategy aimed at achieving the acceptance of a claim, or of a legal right.

Within an ideal model of political process, the acceptance or rejection of a claim to rights should be determined by what objective grounds there are for belief or disbelief in it. (1993:114) Activists conduct argumentation with attention to the practical consequences of their speech, orienting themselves towards a resolution of the dispute they initiated. Yet, they make an orientation to resolution of dispute subordinate to the reporting of their reality, in this case a reality of discrimination. Although compromise occurs regularly in the negotiation of, for example, new legal rights, the argumentative structure of the political argument is geared at reporting a seeming totality of reality and wanting a seeming totality of rights. There are definite limits to compromising the original aim of gaining what was defined as full rights. This original aim is argumentatively set up as objective grounds, but in practicality as standing against the objective grounds of the other party to the dispute. Although the ideal of political process pretends there is one objectivity only, political practice clearly affirms many objectivities. The ideal political process and the practicalities of politics are connected in argumentation, but they are nevertheless contradictory in nature.

Following this elaboration, a tentative attempt at defining politics could look like this: political relations are one of the existing discursive and material orders through which people are constituted as subjects of a state and a society and through which they, in turn, are engaged in the constitution of several discursive orders, such as, for example, gender, kinship, or citizenship. This engagement takes the form of political practices. These practices reflect the power existing in the relevant discursive order and they are active producers of meaning. As such, they need to remain politically intelligible and are taken from an already existing array of practices commonly used within the relevant political system. As subjects in politics, we are subjugated to the requirement of ordering social relations. Social relations are understood as the wider
relations of a community comprised of individuals, but also of classifications of individuals as groups. The requirement to order social relations needs to be understood as a discursive tradition upon which Western-Christian knowledge production rests. Engaging in politics is, then, a discursive—and therefore not an autonomous and independent—act of understanding how we became the political subjects we are. It is not a chain of necessity relentlessly linking the past with the present, but an active participation in competing sets of narratives which are already or are being rendered open to contestation by that very political act. Therefore, the potential of human agency—although understood to be discursive—remains an essential part of the access to politics as clear will to change and to regulate, distribute, and participate in power. Analysing political practices in Europe is, then, a task that draws out the contingencies of political practices and their constitutive aspect in relation to the political subject.

Conclusion

From the perspective of queer theory, sexual politics as political practices are, thus, intrinsically connected to challenge and change. Not in the radical sense of a revolution that will in the future create a material reality congruent with the experiences of a group, but in the sense of rendering perceived experience politically audible. The experiences upon which political acts are apparently grounded are actually the ones made available by the political act. The political practices that individuals perform are constitutive of the experiences said to pre-exist the politics; constitutive of the very identity upon which individuals or groups rest their status as political subjects. Through being constitutive of the political subject, political acts certainly also constitute something: they open up forms of discursive agency that entail the claim to an authority to speak on behalf of a group or an issue. The meaning-creating character of politics is the means through which challenge and change can become an aim of politics and through which material realities, such as actual change, can be obtained. The combination of queer theory and political practices does not designate a deterministic fate of failure for political and social change.

However, in order to achieve its aim, a political practice must adhere to an intersubjectively or institutionally acceptable discussion procedure. That procedure must be negotiated against a substantive background that is taken for granted. (Van Eemeren et. al. 1993:171) Argumentation in political practices, therefore, is to be analysed not only in terms of its success in gaining assent for a right, but also in terms of the background of the procedures by which the assent is gained. The background may be evaluated by participants in political processes in “ways that are tied to the practices of a particular social group sharing certain values and background assumptions, and that what merits assent is itself subject to argumentative
scrutiny”. (1993:22) Part of the task of a queer theoretical reading of political practices is to select and codify that pre-existing system of relevancy.

Yet, analytic reading itself always takes place in terms of a theoretical framework that concentrates on certain aspects of the discourse to the exclusion of other aspects. It reconstructs an argument actively and highlights various features of a political process to the exclusion of other features. (1993:38) Reading reflects the particular interests of the analyst as much as it reflects the argumentation and its implicit adherence to ordering discourses. Taking this condition seriously, a queer analytic reconstruction strives towards remaining justifiable methodically, empirically, culturally, politically and theoretically. Not in any objective and truthful sense of justifiability, but in making the frames it places around political and social conditions explicit, contingent, and changeable. The applicability of queer theory to the analysis of political practices is not sought in the translation of theory into a bundle of instructions and prohibitions. It presents a form of critiquing the rules and procedures to which political practices in Europe are forced to adhere, it points out the fallacies implied in this obligation, and it highlights opportunities for disrupting seemingly fixed orders.