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

Beger, N.J.

Citation for published version (APA):
Beger, N. J. (2001). Que(e)rying political practices in Europe: Tensions in the struggle for sexual minority rights.
CHAPTER THREE
Mind the Gap:
Hybrid Relations of Queer Theory and Political Practice

The homosexual and the postmodernist have been sleeping together a lot lately. And yet, as with much intercourse, the experience has been less than fully pleasurable. (Gregory Bredbeck 1993:254)

Critiquing the rules and procedures to which political practices in Europe are forced to adhere, is no task that has nothing to lose. Queer theory has not been welcomed by all feminist and lesbian or gay theorists nor by all l/g/b/t activists. Its criticism, on the contrary, is often understood as an attack on the achievements of activists and researchers; an attack on what they hold to be essentially necessary and real in their personal lives and their political or academic work. Many see a gaping abyss between theoretical queer concerns and the real life practice of achieving political change. Queer theory is mainly portrayed as an abstracted way of fetishising discourse, as despising empirical research, as confusing the social and the individual as well as language and lived identity, and as substituting the verbal for the political. With the birth of queer theory, another of the well-known theory-practice gaps, debated before in feminism and anti-racist work, was born. The serious dispute over queer theory’s merits and dangers takes over a large part of the academic literature on queer theory and its political applicability. Lisa Duggan once pointedly summarised this debate:

49 An earlier version of this chapter has been published as Beger (2001).
50 Many different concerns are raised in the academic debate. They mainly run along three themes. Firstly, queer theory’s abstract and highly academic discourse uncannily appeared at a point in time at which gays and lesbians had won positions from which to speak. The deconstructive manoeuvres of queer theory erase affirmative standpoints for gayness, do not incorporate a belief in the future and dismantle gay studies in academia. (Derbyshire 1994:39/45; Savoy 1994:131/138; Walters 1996:839) Secondly, queer theory is often accused of erasing lesbians and transgender people yet again, of becoming the universalised voice of the white gay man again and of hierarchising deviance. (Penn 1995:34/39; Walters 1996:846; Guess 1995:23) Queer theory’s separation and mixture of sexuality and gender is mostly identified as a reason for this erasure. (Martin 1994:107-108) And, thirdly, the cancellation of identity while being simultaneously fixated on identity (Guess 1995:35), reduces gay men and lesbians to dispensable fashion victims and focuses on art and style above the political (Savoy 1994:134; Abelove 1995:48). Rosemary Hennessy (1995:31) adds that the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification. A subjectivity that is primarily sexual—as in queer theory—erases the intersections of sexuality with class, gender, and racial histories and fetishises commodity. (Hennessy 1995:34/52) While these three themes are recurring features of most critical stances towards queer theory, there are distinctive differences among the authors named here. Their accounts range from trashing the queer project to serious critical engagement and close reading of queer texts.
In its most clichéd formulations, this controversy is presented in one of two ways: Valiant and dedicated activists working to get civil rights for gay and lesbian people are being undermined by a bunch of obscure, arcane, jargon-ridden academics bent on "deconstructing" the gay community before it even comes into full visibility, or: Theoretically informed writers at the cutting edge of the political horizon are being bashed by anti-intellectual activists who cling—naively—to the discursive categories of their oppressors. (Duggan 1992:19)

The theory–practice gap Duggan describes in its clichéd formulations has in parts surely become a kind of annoying re-iteration and continuing with its oppositional stances is not of interest in this book. However, the implications of this gap have—willingly and unwillingly—become a dominant conflict in my own work, which is characterised by contradictory and conflictual manoeuvres. Manoeuvres within and between traditional rights politics for sexual minorities at a transnational level and the fundamental challenges queer theory—to which I subscribe as an academic—fines at precisely those politics. The theory–practice gap cannot be ignored, neither from the academic nor from the activist side. Thus, I want to pay attention to “mind the gap” in two steps.

First, three personal stories will be used as anecdotal indications for the necessity to re-theorise the apparent contradictions of queer theory and gay and lesbian political practice. The influences of queer theory and its blurring of gender and sexual boundaries are visible almost exclusively at the level of style rather than politics. Many queer theorists remain substantially wary of any politics of recognition that assume the modern constitutional state—or, in the case of the EU, a state-like institution—and its legal system as the privileged site of political action. It is at this point that the apparent rift between “practical politics for rights” and “academic critique” is continuously shaped. Second, I will suggest a deployment of the concept of hybridity as an analytical tool to straddle this gap. Three elements of hybridity are particularly helpful in this respect: antagonistic relations, dialogism, and desire. I ascribe a particular importance to desire as the decisive term that designates both sexual identities and the claim to rights.

**Queer Theories’ Political (Im)Potency**

The following three stories are accounts of a personal “changing of hats”. They exemplify what keeps drawing me and many others back to thinking about the gap between theory and politics. The stories do not serve as conclusive data, but merely illustrate how telling stories as a theorist while simultaneously theorising as an activist has to become a permanent process of dialogisation. A dialogisation that remains—in Bakhtin’s words—an intentional hybrid, a contestatory, conflictual political and ontological setting.
Story I:

On an exceptionally warm and sunny Saturday in February 1998, I sat on the wrong side of the window in a meeting room of the lesbian and gay community in Brussels attending a board meeting of ILGA-Europe. There was excitement in the room: we received 35,000 Euro from the European Commission to write a report on the situation of lesbians and gay men in the fifteen member states of the EU. The political aim was to liaise with other social NGOs to mainstream the broad spectrum of lesbian and gay issues, as a matter of equal participation in civil society and in EU policy. The task to draft the main chapter outlining the arguments fell to me as the young academic in the room. This task lasted several months and turned out to be complicated: there was a clear agreed political goal of arguing the lack of full civic participation beyond simple rights of status. Yet, there was not much time for fundamental critiques and questions about the sense and consequence of a strongly identity-based political argument that remained central. In the course of time, the board also had an argument about the mentioning of transsexual and transgender people which I had included in the draft along with the explicit goal of helping to create a truly multicultural and ethnically diverse Europe. The latter remained, the former got deleted. Overall, the result seemed somewhat tenable to me but flaunted many of the fundamental problems at the heart of my theoretical concerns.

Story II:

Early October 1998. Berlin hosts the first academic conference on Queer Theory and Politics. The conference is held just a week after the Green Party entered into a new coalition government for the first time and announced new citizenship rights—which have since then failed—and some form of partnership bill for homosexual couples—which became law in 2001. The conference featured many renowned American scholars. The organising team's main goal was to create space for long overdue debates. Debates on how gay and lesbian rights—and the movements to obtain those rights—have to be critically viewed for their involvement in reinscribing and re-iterating a legal and cultural system that was invented to exclude homosexuality in the first place. In her lecture, Sabine Hark, a German queer theorist and member of the organising team, used the main chapter of the EU report to illustrate what is at stake in essentialising identities to form a group that can claim rights. She, thus, accused me as one of the authors of the ILGA-Europe report of doing precisely what I had set out not to do: of essentialising identity politics. Wearing the hat of a member of the conference's organising team, in addition to being another speaker and having put a year's worth of "blood, sweat, and tears" into this project, I could not help but agree with her analysis.

---

51 The booklet that emerged out of this project is called *Equality for Lesbians and Gay Men. A relevant issue in the civil and social dialogue*. It is available in print in English, German, French, and Spanish on the webpage of ILGA-Europe.
Story III:

While we were busy critiquing politics based solely on inclusion into heteronormative normality, we were, in turn, critiqued for our seeming oblivion to the real struggles in the real world. Four days before the conference, we invited Lisa Duggan to a public lecture organised for the press. On the second day of the conference we received a full page coverage in the largest German left-wing newspaper, the TAZ. This press coverage brought to the forefront the conflict of interests in gay and lesbian rights politics. It also brought to the forefront the enormous threat that queer theory in general—and a femme lesbian professor from New York in particular—apparently poses to what could now, with the new left wing government, be achieved. The reporter of the TAZ wrote:

queer theory is losing its sight for the really important things: the difference between subtle discrimination—like a hateful glance—and repression—for example the threat of death penalty in Afghanistan. (...) questions of rights and the law, as the possibility to democratic influence are not of interest to queer theorists. (...) queer theory carries no relevancy in the political fight currently happening in Bonn around the new coalition treaty (TAZ 10th/11th Oct. 1998:ix, translation mine).

When I finally approached the sentence “Many young women—is one still allowed to call them lesbians?—came dressed in garçon style, dedicating themselves with boyish eyes entirely to their groupie culture” (TAZ, 12th October 1998:22), I decided to end my readership of this paper. There was a clear conflict of interest being played out here. All of a sudden a group of young lesbians in suits became deeply threatening to a renowned white gay journalist in Berlin. How do these stories picture the dilemma at stake in queer theory’s practical political (im)potency and how might the concept of hybridity be relevant in relation to the theory–practice gap illustrated through these stories?

These three experiences raise mixed feelings in me: I felt defeat at not being able to articulate my sense of what is important in gaining rights. I also felt defeat at not being able to write a political piece that reflects my critical queer concerns. And I felt anger at the sleight of hand and overt sexism with which our attempts at discussing queer theoretical implications for Europe were received in a newspaper that prides itself on being supportive of gay and lesbian rights. Clearly, the TAZ response highlights the fears of acknowledging the limits of gay and lesbian political agendas based on civil and human rights strategies. The conference was searching for a political direction and agenda that does not focus on the integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate effectively. Yet, whatever is said, the queer theoretical critique continues to be received as standing in opposition or in contrast to the aims of the real political fight. Or worse, in opposition to the
enormously brave people who dedicate their lives to fighting for what they call fundamental human rights, like some of my colleagues in ILGA-Europe.

Queer critiques have argued that civil rights do not change the social order in dramatic ways—they change only the privileges of the group asserting those rights. Hence, civil rights strategies do not challenge the moral and anti-sexual underpinning of homophobia, because homophobia does not exhaust itself in a lack of full civil equality. Rather, homophobia and heterosexism arise from the nature and construction of the political, legal, economic, sexual, racial and family systems within which we live. (Urvashi Vaid 1995:183) Thus,

... a theoretical and political project which aims exclusively to normalise homosexuality and to legitimate homosexuality as social minority does not challenge a social regime which perpetuates the production of subjects and social worlds organised and regulated by the heterosexual/homosexual binary. (Seidman 1995:126)

Many theorists also claim that gay and lesbian movements have been based on ethnic or essentialist politics in which clear categories of collective identities are necessary for successful resistance and political gain.52

From the vantage point of a queer or poststructuralist mode of thinking identity-based rights campaigns are, thus, the creation of a phantasmatic political and social space, in which sexual object choice becomes the master category of self and self-identification. The question is whether or not the re-creation of such a master category inevitably and always engages in re-inscribing the fundamental conditions of exclusion. Whether identity-based rights campaigns are the ultimate victory of normatizing regimes or can be strategically deployed at times to expose the instability of sexual difference, can only be answered at the specific locations those campaigns are staged.

The main chapter of the EU report—as a practical-political piece—is an attempt at capturing the many differences among all those who might be called lesbian or gay and the many levels of exclusions they face on the grounds of their sexual and lifestyle choices. The report clearly undertakes to broaden the issues, create connections, and pull lesbians and gay men out of the specific interest group corner into the ranks of the majority of people in Europe who face social exclusion due to one or several aspects of their nature, role, or choices. Yet, in spite of all efforts to the contrary, gay men and lesbians as a somehow fixed category loom large over the argumentation. An example of the type of argumentation used is the following:

In the context of this report, it is irrelevant whether homosexuality is 'caused' by biological factors, socialisation, or choice: the fact is that there is always a decisive number of people in every society who are sexually and socially attracted to members of their own sex. According to the advocate general of

---

the Court of Justice of the European Communities, Michael B. Elmer, the estimated number in the EU is 35 million (Case C-249/96). Sexual orientation is one of the many human diversities that simply exist as a matter of fact. This impacts on how the vision of pluralistic and democratic European societies is argued, lobbied, and enforced; it impacts on all programmes that try to integrate difference, ensure human rights for all people, and attack social injustice. (...) Gay men and lesbians have already reached some of their goals towards equality and social justice, but there remains much to be done. The focus should not, however, be solely on existing discrimination and difference of lesbians and gay men as a group by themselves, but on the ways in which different aspects of the social, economical, and political realm interrelate with issues of sexual orientation, and the importance of the inclusion of lesbian/gay issues in the civil and social dialogues and in the agendas of all NGOs. In this sense, ILGA-Europe sees gay men and lesbians not as a discreet, insular minority, different from the rest of society, but focuses on the many different social positions gay men and lesbians occupy while being part of all walks of society. This can be achieved through an identification of the specific ways gay men and lesbians relate to their social, political and economical environment and an acknowledgement of homosexuality as a factor that potentially hinders their equal participation in some aspects of society, and prevents them from obtaining full social and legal citizenship. (*Equality for Lesbians and Gay Men. A Relevant Issue in the Civil and Social Dialogue* 1998:15).

The fragment clearly shows a problem in political argumentation. Queer theory maintains that identities are constructed precisely where politics are staged, whereas most rights organisations are built on the belief that they represent something which exists prior to their own formation. Diverse sexual orientation is portrayed as a fact of human nature in the excerpt quoted. No matter what discourses on biology or socialisation say, there remains a factual truth expressed in numbers. The final acknowledgement of that truth, according to the argument, necessarily leads to a change in the vision of democratic European societies. This argumentation is based on a claim to truth, but it is not necessarily based on the representation of an identity group. Sexual orientation can be many things beyond fixed identities. It includes an emphasis on sets of practices and it is not necessarily connected to homosexuality or heterosexuality as clearly distinguishable, opposite, and fixed. Yet, the terminology leaps from homosexuality and a clear number of a population group, to sexual orientation and from there to lesbians and gay men. Through this leap sexual orientation as human nature functions as the proof for the existence of a population group that is denied rights and whose rights can be described in their complex relations to gender, class, economic, racial, and social difference.

The argumentation contains a political representation of a complex issue in which many inequalities intersect. There is no explicit claim to represent an actual group in this quotation nor anywhere else in the introduction to the report. In fact, the text (14) explicitly recognises that sexual identity does not amount to a coherent gay identity shared across Europe. Nevertheless, a clear group, albeit diverse, features as
an entity describable through an identity category. That group is presumed to exist prior to the political movement's formation. The political argument claims to make visible and politically deployable what has apparently been there before: "Sexual orientation is one of the many human diversities that simply exists as a matter of fact..." is happily followed by "Gay men and lesbians have already reached some of their goals towards equality and social justice." Despite all efforts to make the issue of social exclusion complex with regard to other forms of oppression, the language employed continues the fiction of the possibility to describe what all gay men and lesbians share—namely a fixed sexual orientation that is not the norm.

Admittedly my—and probably ILGA-Europe's—operative logic in walking the corridors of high power is an assumed homology between experience, interest, identity, and politics. In this logic, the homosexual act leads to an experience of exclusion, the act or at least the experience of exclusion forms an identity, which, in turn, creates a shared interest and a movement that acts on the different aspects of this shared interest. Politics are, then, one form of publicly expressing interest, an argumentative externalisation of a social problem-solving process. Clearly a movement is not one organisation or one particular interest group. According to Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1991:55), a movement is "more like a cognitive territory, a new conceptual space that is filled by dynamic interaction between different groups and organizations". They continue:

And although movements usually involve the creation of organizations or the renovation of institutions, it is important not to mistake the one for the other. Organizations can be thought of as vehicles or instruments for carrying or transporting or even producing the movement's meaning. But the meaning, we hasten to add, should not be reduced to the medium. The meaning, or core identity, is rather the cognitive space that the movement creates, a space for new kinds of ideas and relationships to develop.

ILGA-Europe is an organisation that carries, transports, and produces meaning about European gay and lesbian movements. At its core, the meaning ILGA-Europe produces refers to a homology between experience, interest, identity, and politics. While none of my interviewees claimed to be able to actually speak for—and therefore do not assume to represent—all lesbians and gay men in Europe, they do claim to represent issues of inequality and justice. They have a clear sense of the

53 Gay identity is not the only pre-existing category here either. The European, as the entity to whom citizenship rights are granted, is another unproblematised category.
54 See my explanation on argumentation theory according to van Eemeren et. al. (1993) in Chapter Two.
55 Ken Plummer (1995:141) adds another important feature to the theory of social movements. He maintains that:

to maintain vitality, all successful social movements must remain in conflict and struggle. Once conflict ceases, movements are prone to co-optation by the dominant order, becoming institutionalized or even ceasing function. They need to be moved on through contestation, schism, and conflict: without these, they become static, wither, and often die.
existence of a movement prior to them taking up these issues. This operative logic finds expression in the formulations quoted above. Through these formulations, identity re-enters the stage via the back door. Not as a fixed and describable essence of gayness, but as a handrail along which sexual experience, discrimination, sexual and social community, and political interest becomes expressible. The contents of the gay and lesbian movement and homosexual identity are, thus, created at the very instance of argumentation practice in politics.

The leap in the EU report from sexual orientation to gay men and lesbians as a social group—which was the focus of the critique voiced by Sabine Hark (1998:14)—is not the only way identity re-enters in a critical way. The problem is also the way that leap takes part in manifesting other categories of oppression and exclusion as describable identity groups. The fact that lesbians and gay men as a group remain politically identifiable in the argumentation implies the existence of other clearly distinct groups, such as racial minorities or transsexuals. Although the aim was to find joint ground with other social NGOs and to connect the issues of discrimination applicable to the respective constituencies, the maintenance of the logic of homology produced the scope for the debate among the executive board about the inclusion of transgender people and a multicultural Europe. In consequence this logic also produced the scope for the compromise to delete the former and include the latter. The problem of gay identity in that logic is not so much that we mistakenly believe in our self-namings. It is rather that we believe in the promise of inalienable rights assigned to those namings. These rights seem to accrue once our status as political subjects is secured. (Patton 1995:23) Hence, we miss the point that clear collective categories are often an obstacle to resistance and change.

Most activists on the European stage are not actually guilty of inscribing fixed identity categories. As Cindy Patton remarks “deconstructionists may believe in the imputed essentialist identities, much more than those in the political sphere who are purported to have them.” (1993:166) Yet, to let go of identity entirely seems to destroy the base principle of the political argument most commonly and successfully deployed. The back door entry of identity remains a crucial crutch. Therefore, a sense of threat and annoyance at the impracticability of the queer critique arises alongside the agreement that the basis of domination and control rest in the power invested in certain identity categories and in the idea that bounded categories are not to be transgressed. (Cohen 1997:481) This simultaneity features in my illustrated troubles with my “changing hats”.

The logic of the queer critique still vies with the logic of shoring up all those oppressed to demand the recognition of their actual lives. It vies with the logic of commonality between people who work for equality, freedom and social justice, for the right to make choices, and have access to the social and financial means to exercise a wide range of democratic choices. Although I have just analysed the

---

56 I will analyse the conceptualisation of identity apparent in the interviews more specifically in relation to agency in Chapter Nine.
problematic aspects of the political text I drafted myself, I still feel I could switch hats and argue for every sentence in the report’s introduction. So on the one hand, the critique outlined above does little in terms of practical advice about how to take on regulatory institutions, such as the law, governments, or education, which continue to enforce the heterosexual gender binary. The critique does not do justice to the degree in which presenting a group that claims rights can be both a necessary and a fulfilling strategy of survival. On the other hand, my piece in the EU report does little to challenge the principle of heteronormativity and the rigid binary gender system. It substantially fails to do justice to the fundamental interconnectedness among different discourses of marginalisation, such as transgender, race, and disability. In my work, each logic is somehow true and none is fully tenable. Hence, the challenge is not to determine which position is true, better, or more successful, but to cope with the fact that both logics make sense.

Thus, the conflict at stake—or my own re-opening of the theory–practice gap—should be conceptualised as a productive procedure: a productive procedure in the sense of reconnecting a critique of identity to the actual political forces that make collective identity necessary and meaningful. This reconnection needs to occur at the same time as a move to reconnect the particular necessity to render our lives intelligible through creating categories of belonging to the analysis of the damaging effects of buying entry tickets into the world of the privileged. (Gamson 1996:411) Although entry tickets to regulated partnerships, for example, might be obtainable, only a few will get to use them. They won’t be valid for anybody whose life-style choices disrupt a clear sense of gender identity or monogamous coupledom.

At the heart of what one could call queer theory’s political (im)potency is the simultaneity of different workings of oppression, exclusion and marginalisation. On the one hand, oppression, exclusion, and marginalisation stems from the binary gender structure and the pretended natural pre-script of sexed bodies. On the other hand, they stem from the already established institutions with whom we somehow have to negotiate whether we want to or not. (1996:412) The former makes destabilising categories a smart strategy, the latter needs bounded categories to remain intelligible and smart. (1996:413) Could ILGA-Europe, as an NGO with official consultative status to transnational institutions, develop a repertoire of political argumentation able to cope with the simultaneous workings of oppression, exclusion, and marginalisation? When does a quasi-ethnic identity manoeuvre reach out to destabilise its own implications and when does a deconstructionist tactic effectively help a gay transsexual win his custody case?

Asking these questions brings a residue of dissatisfaction with this analysis to the surface. While being intellectually satisfying and important, the recognition of paradoxes—here the validity of both the critique and the success of identity politics—is too often the point at which we stop analysing. Such a recognition of paradoxes acknowledges that the “lesbian and gay faith in the authenticity or even political efficacy of identity categories and the queer suspension of all such
classifications energise each other, offering in the 1990s – and who can say beyond? – the ambivalent reassurance of an unimaginable future”. (Jagose 1996:132) Yet, the recognition of paradoxes alone does not explain how that energising takes effect. It also does not put an end to the constant re-opening of a theory–practice gap among activists and among academics, which blocks an engagement that takes the queer critique to heart and works with it.

Rather, I want to suggest that this energising could be understood as a fertile—but hopefully non-normative—intercourse, and its offspring is a hybrid in the classical sense. There is no path out of the theory–practice dynamic I set out to examine, only a path into it. In my attempts to probe the possibilities of going beyond the recognition of paradoxes I want to re-visit the concept of hybridity as one possible path into the dynamic set out above. Three of the many possible aspects of hybridity seem intriguing in their ability to conceptually handle or dissolve the gap: antagonistic relations, the dialogic unmasking of the normative, and desire.

Straddling the Gap: Hybridity

The concept of hybridity has become an important category in gay and lesbian studies. Originally stemming from biology—where it referred to offspring of two different species—and historically connoting the considered to be infertile offspring between a slave and a white master, hybridity has been taken up—in spite of its racist history—as an analytical concept in many disciplines. As an analytical concept it has travelled more or less successfully from theorists of language and race or ethnicity to theorists concerned with sexual identity and homosexuality. Within the deployment of hybridity in gay and lesbian studies the focus usually rests on subjectivity, i.e. the construction of sexually non-normative subjectivities in a diasporic and dialogic existence relative to the dominance and hegemony of heteronormative discourse. Inspired by Michail Bakhtin’s, Stuart Hall’s, and Homi Bhabha’s usage of hybridity, theorists in the field of gay and lesbian studies have deployed concepts such as mimicry, performativity and discursive constructedness to understand the formation of gay subjectivity, resistance, challenge and change. Queer theory is probably the most persuasive, in-depth and articulated branch of the field that engages in the explicit, or implicit, mobilisation of hybridity as an analytical concept.

A recent assessment of hybridity in the field has been undertaken by Alan Sinfield in *Gay and After* in 1998. Sinfield is critical of any concept of hybridity that simply transfers it out of its relations to race and ethnicity. The connections of hybridity to the diaspora and the diasporic experience as it comes out of postcolonial studies is not simply applicable to any homosexual experience. There is no imaginary place homosexuals originate from and kinship is not the transmitter of gayness. Nevertheless, in relation to where most l/g/b/t people come from, the creation of
the family substitute subculture is indeed a form of diaspora in a hegemonic heteronormative society. Sinfield summarises:

The hybridity of our subcultures derives not from the loss of even a mythical unity, but from the difficulty we experience in envisioning ourselves beyond the framework of normative heterosexism—the straightgeist—as Nicholson Baker calls it, on the model of zeitgeist.... It is a kind of reverse diaspora that makes our subcultures hybrid. (Sinfield 1998:30-31)

The concept of hybridity, though, remains a mixed blessing for Sinfield when he re-considers Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity as the third space that gives rise to something new. (1998:32). According to Sinfield, Bhabha’s and—more directly relevant—Judith Butler's cases of mimicry play back or imitate colonial discourse or gender norms and, in turn, disclose the precariousness of the authority of those discourses. Yet, both are not taking into account the factors of power and resistance to the extent necessary in facing the gender and race hegemony. Sinfield contends that "hybridity has to be addressed not in the abstract, but as a social practice” (1998:34) and he warns that

Hybridisation may be a necessary tactic, but it has to be pursued with determination and suspicion (of straightgeist influence). Certainly its political impetus cannot be taken for granted as some theorists seem to be saying. (Sinfield 1998:37)

Sinfield gives the assessment of hybridity as analytical concept a common twist here. He opens a gap between the radical queer anti-essentialist critique and the practice of politics focused on what can be realistically achieved politically. Although hybridity functions as another stabiliser of the gap between queer theory and politics yet again, it can alternatively be deployed as a concept that remedies the re-iteration of that very gap.

As my stories in the beginning of this chapter illustrate, it often seems as if queer theory and gay and lesbian rights politics are entirely antagonistic to each other, even if that apparent antagonism is complex. Yet, antagonistic relations do not necessarily present a deadlock. They can be the very aspect that progresses critique and practice. Antagonistic relations are a central aspect of understanding political practice as a hybrid articulation. Hybridity can in this respect, however, not function as a “closed system in which elements given distinct, diametrical identities clash, and definitely

57 Butler illustrates her point through a description of drag and butch/femme cultures. She sheds new light on the relation between imitation and the so-called original. In imitating gender, drag, for example, implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency. (1990:137)

The mimicry favoured by both Bhabha and Butler is not a narcissistic identification that will ultimately deny subjectivity and agency to the marginal subject, but is rather used as the “gaze of otherness.... Where the observer becomes the observed and ‘partial’ representation rearticulates the whole notion of identity and alienates it from essence.” (Bhabha 1984:129)

58 To be fair, Sinfield is himself a strong critic of essentialism and gay ethnicity arguments. However, he unwittingly re-opens the typical theory-practice gap in his assessment of hybridity.

68
resolve their contrast in the (re)production of a ‘higher unity’ external to them.” (Becquer & Gatti 1991:70)

Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti suggest that the two elements that form a hybrid—in their case European and African symbolic systems—are in antagonistic relations to each other.\(^59\) Antagonism here avoids the impression that the product is comprised of two essential distinct parent elements into a new-born, but independent and distinct new entity. What forms the hybrid to them are not contradictory elements that can be joined at any level, but elements which are in antagonistic relations and which “thereby expand the logics of struggle”. (1991:72)

What emerges is never a unity at peace, but a creature that is marked by internal struggle. Substituting the term hybridity with syncretism for historical reasons, Becquer and Gatti conclude that hybrid “relations are, in this sense, traversed by a double movement of both alliance and critique”. (1991:74)

Queer theory could as such bring its alliance—it’s clear commitment to politics and social change—and its critique—its fundamental destabilisation of essentialist assumptions or its open address of desire—to human rights based work, supporting and questioning it simultaneously. As a syncretic or hybrid articulation, the mixture of queer theory and gay and lesbian rights politics becomes a radicalisation of the impossibility of the search for definite political practices and rights. The mixture becomes a radicalisation of the logic of struggle, internally for the dangers and successes of representational politics, and externally for the most productive disruption of the gender binary and the heteronormative structure of European democratic societies. It seems, therefore, not useful to talk about an unresolved conflict, but rather about a fertilisation that encompasses the antagonistic relations of what can become critical queer political practice. The gap is, thus, straddled not by re-iterating it each time political practices are theoretically analysed, but by understanding antagonism to be the very factor that renders such analysis fruitful.

In antagonistic relations to each other, critique and practice also relate dialogically and retain the power to unmask and destabilise hegemonic discourses. This task of unmasking authoritative discourse, of unmasking hegemonic statutes of truth is what inspired Mikhail Bakhtin to first introduce the concept of hybridity into linguistics. In his *Discourse and the Novel* Bakhtin connects the hegemony of certain cultural-ideological discourses to the hybrid nature of language:

> A common unitary language is a system of linguistic norms. But these norms.... (are) forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought.... Thus a unitary

\(^59\) Becquer and Gatti prefer syncretism instead of hybridity as the better term to emphasise heterogeneity. (1991:69) In fact, one of the central tenets of their paper argues against hybridity and for syncretism. This argument rests on the aim to defeat hybridity’s racist history. I will not engage in the distinction of these terms here since I deploy the term hybridity in a way that is cut loose from its racialised history. This is, admittedly, a slightly de-contextualised appropriation of the term which focuses only on some aspects of hybridity as a theoretical concept.
language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in the vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical cultural centralization. (1986:667)

Heteroglossia in Bakhtin refers to the conflict between official and unofficial discourses within national languages, but also to the micro-linguistic level: every utterance contains conflictual traces of different meanings. Because heteroglossia is present in all utterances, speech and discourse are always hybrid, they foreground the clash of antagonistic social forces. (1986:668-670) Dialogism is, then, the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia, where there is a constant interaction between meanings. (1986:669)

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction... Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. (1986:672)

Bakhtin posits an internal dialogic imperative of words, as the world of language pre-exists any human inhabitant of it. (1986:671) This view of the pre-existence of language is crucial for poststructuralist thought.

Words, practices, and political relations always undergo dialogisation, they become relativised, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions. Only at the point where a discourse sets itself up as authoritative, absolute and true, does it become undialogised for Bakhtin; or better—to speak with Judith Butler—does it seem undialogised. In fact all authoritative discourse always already contains its own contestation by the very processes with which it sets itself up as truth. (Butler 1990:72-78) Although Bakhtin's writing is clearly connected to a theory of the novel, Graham Pechey points out that “there is nothing in the concept of dialogism that prevents us from using it to explain the organisation of hegemony itself”. (1989:54) As such the concept of dialogism can easily travel over and into the theory–practice gap.

As utterances, both identity-based rights argumentation and queer critiques are geared towards an answer structure, carry their contestation in themselves, albeit not necessarily in reply to each other. While the queer critiques usually take representational identity-based politics as their opposite, organisations involved in those politics gear their discourse less towards academic theory than to what is perceived as the rights-granting majority or to institutions. However, that is not a hindrance to a dialogic engagement between theory and political practice, since ultimately both practices aim at eliminating structures of oppression and exclusion in relation to sexuality and gender. My efforts in coping with my “changing hats”, then, become an intentional semantic hybrid in Bakhtin’s sense. A semantic hybrid that is inevitably internally dialogic and distinct from organic hybrids. (Bakhtin 1986:674-675) Two points of view are mixed, but set against each other dialogically.
Whereas in organic hybridity there is a merging and fusing into a new and independent product, language, or worldview, intentional hybridity retains the different points of view or objects in a conflictual structure that remains energetic and open-ended. Bakhtin’s intentional hybridity intervenes in the re-iteration of the gap as a form of subversion, translation, or transformation. In its dialogical structure, hybridity offers a permanent sense of interrogation, of unmasking, and of the fundamental priority of discourse as the site of the staging of politics and the articulation of theory. Hybridisation as queer political chaos does not produce a new theory that faithfully reflects practical political necessity or a political activism that faithfully reflects the conditions of queer theory. It is rather closer to Butler’s restless, playful, interstitial performativity: a radical heterogeneity, discontinuity, the permanent revolution of the meaning of sexuality as a marker of identity and subsequent social, political, or economical rights. Yet, not only queer theory produces that restless, playful, interstitial performativity: the political practices of rights politics carry the potential to do the same.

Revolutionising the meaning of sexuality within the political practices of European lesbian and gay rights lobbying foremost entails a centralising and re-conceptualisation of desire as the motor for sexual identity formation and for rights argumentation. Within the history of the concept of hybridity, desire played an important role. Theories of race in the nineteenth century—settling on the impossibility or possibility of hybridity—focused explicitly on sexuality and fertility: “theories of race were also covert theories of desire.” (Young 1995:9) The term hybridity is surely problematic in its call on the history of racism, in its connotation of the pure origin of the two things that are joined (Bequer & Gatti 1991:66) and in its reference to parents and offspring, which potentially re-inforces a heteroessentialism of sexuality. (1991:68) However, its connection to language and sexuality, hence, to a theory of desire, sheds an intriguing light on some aspects of the theory-practice gap: the relations between the desire for rights—for a social belonging—and the desire for the expression of sexualities and gender identities in a heteronormative social, economical and political world.

The operative basis for my involvement in ILGA a few years ago was a clear left-over desire for equality in its mainstream humanist sense, as equality before the law. It was a desire that is intrinsically fuelled by some form of acceptance of the hegemony of the juridical as measurement of whether we—who express deviant sexual or gender desires—are allowed to belong to the citizenship of the European Union. Both desires—the desire for the expression of one’s sexuality and gender and the desire for equal rights—are involved in all political practices for rights. Desire

---

60 The term intentional is problematic in that it often connotes an independent author outside of discourse. What is meant here, however, is an intentional or better aware creation of antagonistic relations. An intentional hybrid is a form of relation that exposes its own origin, remains conscious of its contingency and is intentional in the sense that the contradictions that emerge are part and parcel of the aim at the outset.
wields power over the perception of the homosexual experience and over the formulation of rights politics.

The so-called homosexual experience in and of itself is already a critical concept for two reasons: first, experience is not a transparent, true and objective mirror of a reality structured by an essential identity, but rather in itself already a discursive event that produces identities and realities. Second, the so-called homosexual experience of homophobia and heterosexism that leads to the claim for rights is a ruptured experience that does not allow any one conclusion to be drawn from it. Even within essentialist definitions of gay identity, the reports on daily homosexual experiences acknowledge contradictory elements in relation to what the meaning of gayness entails in the different social relations each human lives in. Equality before the law can obviously never accommodate all those relations, it remains a fantasy never to be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, the re-entry of identity through the back door in rights argumentation hinges on a belief that gay and lesbian experience is describable and that rights can accommodate that experience. It appears as if the definition of a certain sexual desire as a marker of discrimination needs to rest on a clearly identifiable group that shares the same experience. In turn, it is that same group which expresses a desire for rights through their struggles to obtain equality. Thus, apparently both forms of desire are involved in all political practices employed in a fight for rights for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people. Additionally, there is a third desire involved when queer theory comes onto the plan: the desire to grapple with the ruptured experiences in many different social relations that are not captured by identity politics. By placing sexuality into the centre of European knowledge production, queer theory also places desire in the centre of epistemology. Desire, therefore, fuels both, mainstream rights politics and queer theoretical critique.

The previous argument, however, involves a shift: a shift from sexual desire to political desire, or to the desire for rights. The connection I establish in this respect is not self-evident; it only works within an understanding of desire that is discursive rather than a psychological reality eternally fixed by the rules and laws of gender formation. In this respect, desire cannot be understood as the uncontainable psychic nature of an individual that bursts through cultural constraints. Instead, desire is an outcome of the productive qualities of discourses made available in discursive practices. As Bronwyn Davies writes:

But I argue here that desire is spoken into existence, it is shaped through discursive and interactive practices, through the symbolic and the semiotic. Desires are constituted through the narratives and storylines, the metaphors,

---

62 I have explained the following in more detail elsewhere (Beger 1997).
the very language and patterns of existence through which we are 'interpellated'
into the social world. (Davies 1990b:501)

In Davies' concept of desire, unconscious processes take a significant part in the
constitution of desire. Davies criticises the juxtaposition of an unconscious desire
and a conscious agency, and hence, the oppositional character of that which is
conscious and that which is unconscious. (Davies 1991:44) It is crucial to understand
that—given the fact that gender matrices constitute a major part of our dominant
discourses—desire is constituted in gendered identities. Desire is, therefore, never
independent from the regulatory practices of the dominant dualisms of male/female,
or heterosexuality/homosexuality through which we construct a sense of person-
hood. This sense of personhood, in turn, is the basis upon which people can claim
membership to the realm of democratic rights. A queer or poststructuralist
understanding of the concept of personhood emphasises that the desire to be
something and act as something originates in discourses rather than essential selves.
In this sense, desire functions as a fundamental signifier of what constitutes people
as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered and, thus, belonging to a minority and as
persons that can and do claim rights which are denied them. In the case of lesbian
and gay politics, the desire to have rights others apparently have is an active
positioning of oneself in relation to discourses of democratic rights and
simultaneously to discourses of sexual desire.

The positioning of selves in discourses is, in this context, understood as a process
of locating selves in conversations and written texts in which participants
interactively assign meanings to their identities and experiences. As such, participants
can position themselves as reflexive expressions of past experiences or culturally
dominant interpretations, and they are simultaneously positioned by what others say
about them. Although we can actively participate in our positioning, the process of
positioning is not assumed to be necessarily intentional or fully coherent, nor
consciously recognisable. Also, any active positioning depends on the capacity to
take oneself up as a person, consciously or unconsciously, which is only possible
through discursive practices.63

Discursive practices are ways in which people produce social and psychological
realities through engaging in—or refusing repetitions of—certain practices. (Davies
& Harré 1990:45) Discourses provide practices that regulate the intelligibility of

63 In relation to sexuality and desire, Teresa de Lauretis emphasises that both belong to the realm of
fantasy

which trespasses beyond the couch, beyond the bedroom, into the public spaces of representation.
Thus the public representation of lesbianism, including most importantly lesbian discursive and
performative practices, can be an equally effective discourse, yielding 'multiple effects of
displacements, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself' (Foucault). (1994:293)
Desire is, thus, subjected to the conditions of fantasy and to the conditions of the imaginable realm in
which discursive boundaries are effective but also transgressable. (994:284) De Lauretis' formulations
are another more psychoanalytic way of explaining what Bronwyn Davies calls the process of
positioning.
identities and through their repetition or disruption we take ourselves up as participants and producers of those discourses. Through engaging in discursive practices people appropriate as their own the desires that are made relevant in the discourses to which the regulatory practices belong. Desire is, thus, relevant for the expression of sexuality and subsequent formation of a homosexual identity upon which rights are apparently claimed. It is also relevant for the expression of being a human or a citizen endowed with rights. Any analysis of rights politics needs to centralise desire as the motor of taking oneself up as a person belonging to a community in law or in social and political orders. Claiming rights becomes an appropriation of the desire made relevant in the discourses of participation and citizenship, which are—among others—based on the regulatory practices of a gender order. In turn, it is this gender order which functions as the only available field in relation to which sexual desire and the desire to belong to a gender can be formed.

Hence the connection between sexual desire and the desire for rights. And hence also the central role desire needs to play in a critical analysis of l/g/b/t politics. Naming the conditions of desire—understood as the central motor of any sexual identity and of the constitution of oneself as a person entitled to rights—and centralising it in the formation of the political is a path towards tackling some of the contradictions and troubles the queer critique has raised. An analysis of desire brings to the fore the contradiction of sexual identity as such and troubles any idea of a subsequent erection of rights claims based on an a-priori existing group.

Considering sexual identity as a basis for the political is to some extent a "productive contradiction in terms". (Butler 1997b:104) According to Butler, Identity is formed through a prohibition on some dimension of the very sexuality it is said to describe. (1997b:103) She continues that any formation of the subject—including the rights-bearing citizen—requires a sexuality founded on the prohibition of a certain desire which at the same time forms that sexuality and the subject that is said to bear it. Thus, any political practices that firmly ground themselves in clear and fixed sexual identities, will prolong a contradiction in terms into the political without being able to utilise the productive sides of this contradiction. To expose those contradictions as productive is a necessary task that only becomes accessible when and where desire is centralised as the site at which the transition from sexuality and gender to effective political practice occurs. I contend that it is also for this reason that queer theory needs to centralise desire beyond affirming the sexualisation of the public and the ways all humans are gendered and sexualised at every moment in which they interact.

Desire beyond the gender binary could be said to rest at the heart of queer theory and the desire for rights at the heart of European gay and lesbian politics. To marry the two, to hybridise them, means to relate the sexual and the political through desire. This becomes a relation that functions in various ways, which grant access to seeing the multiple effects of displacements, intensification, reorientation, and
modification of sexuality and gender in the performance of political practice. I contend that the conflictual energy and open endedness of hybridity is, arguably, a way into the conflict, a stirrup into the saddle of the theory–practice gap analysed above. Conceptualising hybridity, as I have, offers a contestatory activity, a politicised setting up of epistemological differences against each other dialogically. The crucial effect of hybridisation is the political moment at which, within a single discourse, one meaning of an utterance unmask the other, a point at which the authority of any discourse is undone, questioned, destabilised. Engaging in theory and political activism is not a process of merging but one of dialogue: a dialogue of differences in the operative logic of theory and politics set critically against each other. To be fruitful these differences need to be two simultaneous phases of the same movement, which constantly overlap and mingle. Or to say it differently: my multiple hats shall be left in a state of coitus interruptus, with the memory and tease of a process and not the assurance and smugness of orgasm.64

Conclusion

Having said all this, however, does not grant a final peace to the conflicts that arise out my wearing two hats. This argument only ends a destructive analysis of this conflict. It ends an analysis that re-creates an insurmountable gap between theory and practice and that precludes all applicability of queer theory to the practicalities of rights politics in Europe. Conflicts between theory and political practice are not new. What the queer critique foregrounds is the fact that the line between normative and non-normative has ceased to simply run along the heterosexual-homosexual divide. The cutting edges of that line are a zigzag and they continuously move with the changing conditions of modernity. After all, the fact that the location of this line is not so obvious anymore is possibly the grandest success of the gay and lesbian movements in obtaining visibility, acceptance, and tolerance.

To those seeking legal equality and social justice in the existing order, queer theory need not pose any threat, but presents an acknowledgement of their successes: eventually inclusion will be gained, homosexuality will cease to be the primary factor of radical exclusion as long as it does not challenge the fundamental order of human relations which remains heteronormative. Queer theory simply foretells the breaking apart—of what was formerly a group characterised by solidarity—into new affiliations around different rally-points than homosexual identity. It foretells the eruption of new gaps along non-identitarian subjectivities or along the hierarchised binary gender divide that rests beneath questions of sexual orientation. Queer theory addresses those troubled by leaving the heterosexual order unchallenged. As a historical moment the poststructuralist feminist and queer critiques form something like an epistemic break in the conception of gender and

64 Gregory Bredbeck (1993) has formulated this in relation to postmodernism and homosexuality.
sexuality. They are neither new nor old and the gap they currently produce might not remain an issue of concern in the future when certain rights have been gained and when movements evolve into other movements along different issues.

Why then—I might ask rhetorically—should we mind the gap in the first place? What dangers await us if we don’t? What desires could be fulfilled through the free fall? Tampering with the signs that prohibit entry into formerly unknown spaces is after all what gay liberation used to be about. So while the unsexy tin voice of the London tube continues to warn us ”Mind the gap!”, no stop requires one to exit through it once and for all, and no gap prevents us from applying critical modes of reading to the predicaments of staging rights politics. In short, I suggest a deployment of queer theory as one mode of reading political reality for the purpose of putting desire back on the agenda, centralising it by understanding the formative power it wields over the claim to rights and over the subject formation of activists as agents of change, which I discuss at the end of this book. Yet, the applicability of queer theory as a mode of reading remains context specific. Any form of applicability needs to include a critical examination of queer thought in an European context that centres so fundamentally on universal human rights as political rally-point.