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Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times (1970s-2010s)

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Neoliberalism—as both economic theory and social or cultural formation—has had a profound effect on LGBT/queer cultures and politics. David Harvey defines neoliberalism as an economic theory that "propagates that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." 1 Neoliberalism is also a cultural formation that produces and validates marketized understandings of the social world. As Wendy Brown argues, drawing on Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics and governmentality, neoliberalism is aimed at "extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action." 2 Neoliberalism offers "freedom" as the core political goal, and the market as the site where that freedom might be realized.

This vision has reshaped LGBT communities, debates, and social movements in the era after gay liberation. As neoliberal policies sought to privatize social services, foster consumer citizenship, and promote corporate welfare and urban re-development, LGBT sexual politics increasingly pitted "deserving" gay and lesbian people against "undeserving" others. Three constellations exemplify this trend: (1) the same-sex married couple vs. the "welfare queen," (2) the gay/lesbian consumer-citizen vs. the poor queer, and (3) the gay gentrifier vs. the "dangerous" other. Historicizing these oppositions reveals the intersections of sexuality, class, gender, race, and social policy that remain central to queer politics today in the aftermath of—if not after—neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism: Economics, Politics, Culture

Scholars have traced a pre-history of neoliberalism to the 1940s or even the 1920s, finding important intellectual precursors to neoliberalism proper in the attacks on Roosevelt's New Deal, the Public Works Administration, and the 1935 Social Security Act in the US; universal pension, unemployment insurance, and the National Health Service in the UK; and on stock market and financial regulations in the name of property rights, economic rationality, and competition. Members of the Mount Pelerin Society, a neoliberal think tank founded by Friedrich August von Hayek in 1947, and the "Chicago Boys," especially Milton Friedman,
Neoliberalism and Queer Culture and Politics

Neoliberalism creates and relies on racial, gendered, and sexual inequality, but justifies this social inequality as a logical outcome of free choice, personal responsibility, and individualism. By redefining citizenship as ownership and freedom in freedom to consume, neoliberal economic policies have disadvantaged social welfare, subverted a property-based right to property, and destroyed public social–cultures accessible to poor, young, queer, and transgendered communities of color. Building on the groundbreaking work of historians such as John D’Emilio, who linked gay identity to the rise of industrial capitalism, I focus on the ways in which neoliberalism in its relation to the culture of what Fredric Jameson has termed late capitalism, celebrates, endorses, and supports some aspects of sexuality, while at the same time limiting, policing, and punishing others.

As a result, neoliberalism has narrowed the vision of much LGBT political organizing to what Lisa Duggan calls “homonormativity”: “a politics that does not contest dominant heterosexual assumptions and institutions but uphold[s] and sustain[s] them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in atomization and consumption.” Mainstream gay–lesbian organizations have pursued individual and family-based rights and moved away from liberationist or radical demands for dismantling oppressive systems or promoting sexual freedom or pleasure. We can see this vision reflected in the primary goals of the national movement through the 2010s: same-sex marriage and family recognition rights, market–cultural viability, access to the military, and hate crime/safety legislation. The following three cases show how homonormativity has guided the mainstream LGBT rights movement for the past three decades.

Privatization of Social Services: Gay Marriage/The Welfare Queen

A February 15, 1976 New York Times article entitled “‘Welfare Queen’ Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” begins: “Few people realize it, but Linda Taylor, a 47-year-old Chicago welfare recipient, has become a major campaign issue in the New Hampshire Republican Presidential Primary.” The term “Welfare Queen” was popularized by Ronald Reagan in his 1976 stump speeches, where he used it to describe a poor black woman on welfare who was purportedly stealing the system. This figure helped to rally support and justification for the massive cuts to welfare and social services that Reagan pursued. The “welfare queen” trafficked in older iconographies of poor women’s deviant sexuality that were reinvigorated after the 1965 Model Cities Report on the generated and sexual “pathologies” of the black family. The_report stressed single mothers as an “uncontrollable sexual behavior”—and thus responsible for their own poverty. Relating on and reusing these imaginative links between race, poverty, and sexual pathology, the image of the “Welfare Queen” played a central role in portraying the poor as greedy, not needy. Hetero-normative sexual desire to rationalize poverty, the image helped shore up public support for the privatization and elimination of social services (in spite of the fact that most who needed welfare and child assistance were and are white).

This image continued to do its work in the post-Reagan era. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, for example, dramatically cut funding to basic safety net programs and used “welfare as we know it,” as Bill Clinton pledged. After public debate about welfare “abusers,” the act replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and required welfare recipients to take low-paying jobs to qualify for benefits (workfare). It also aimed to limit the number of children on welfare and social services that Reagan pursued. The “welfare queen” trafficked in older iconographies of poor women’s deviant sexuality that were reinvigorated after the 1965 Model Cities Report on the generated and sexual “pathologies” of the black family. The_report stressed single mothers as an “uncontrollable sexual behavior”—and thus responsible for their own poverty. Relating on and reusing these imaginative links between race, poverty, and sexual pathology, the image of the “Welfare Queen” played a central role in portraying the poor as greedy, not needy. Hetero-normative sexual desire to rationalize poverty, the image helped shore up public support for the privatization and elimination of social services (in spite of the fact that most who needed welfare and child assistance were and are white).

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until marriage, heteronormative marriage and family forms, and control over the reproductive futures of "undesirable" populations (poor people, indigenous people, people of color, queer people). Cathy Cohen argues that marriage promotion is one way that non-normative gender identities are rendered invisible to mainstream LGBT movement efforts to secure marriage on a national level. In this context, the LGBT movement's work on same-sex marriage must be viewed as part of neoliberal policies that offer marriage as a privatized solution to people's needs for childcare, healthcare, economic security, and social recognition.

In the 2015 US Supreme Court case granting same-sex couples the right to marry, the Court argued that marriage is "foundational to individual autonomy, liberty, and personal choice; that marriage "fulfills yearnings for security, site haven, and connection that express shared yearnings for human connection"; and that marital status is the "keystone" for both social recognition and common humanity. As Cohen writes, "Same-sex marriage, far from ending 'marriage as we know it,' preserves a narrow version of what it is to be married, and continues to shift its responsibility for the well-being of its citizens to some private form that we label the family."

For many queer critics, because marriage promotion is one way that non-normative gender identities are rendered invisible to mainstream LGBT movement efforts to secure marriage on a national level, the neoliberal state's emphasis on marriage was a continuation of a pattern of state intervention in the lives of queer people. Cohen argues that this is a pernicious myth. As Amber Hollibaugh and Margot Weiss show, the media and the corporate polity present same-sex couples as the model of family and normalcy. This is a political strategy used by advertisers, marketers, and politicians to normalize and naturalize same-sex marriage.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the pink market became a focal point for advertisers and marketers. The term "pink market" refers to the segment of the gay and lesbian market that is defined by its consumption of goods and services that are targeted specifically at LGBT adults. This market is often described as affluent, well-educated, fashionable, and "pink." The pink market is often contrasted with the mainstream or "blue" market, which is defined by its consumption of goods and services that are targeted specifically at heterosexuals.

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the rainbow paraphernalia and work in low-wage service or small jobs and street economies in gay neighborhoods. When LGBT activism pivoted the gay community to the cost of most.

In December 2010, the New York Times reported that “After 30 Years, Times Square Is Rebiblical Complete.” The project was a success. “Come is drawn significantly from the days when that stretch of 42nd Street was known The number of tourists is up 74 percent since 1995. And while many billboards in Times Square were blank in 1979, today the area is a kaleidoscope of moving images depicting form of tax incentives and corporate welfare schemes for other US urban redevelopment projects. Through the gentrification of commodifiable spaces of consumption, redevelopment replaced with locked and gated parks and new condominium complexes. Redevelopment is about fanning off unwanted colored [and queer] bodies. As such, they have benefited from and reinforced neoliberal capitalist restructuring: the massive strip clubs and erotic video stores and isoleted nonresidential neighborhoods, prohibiting their proximity to schools, houses of worship, and other similar commercial establishments. By the end of the decade, Michael Warner warned, “a pushpins over the public life of queer people. . . It is complete.”

As with marriage rights and consumer citizenship, the documentation of urban space meant that sexual cultures—including gay spaces—have been increasingly reduced to privatized spaces of consumption. Gay neighborhoods such as New York City’s Village or San Francisco’s Castro became tourist attractions and shopping/entertainment enclaves, capitalizing on the image of gay and lesbians as affluent, stylish consumers and taste-makers. Rather than representing vice or perversity as they had for most decades—by the gay movement, by AIDS activists, and by consumers of many different kinds—we are now branded with a new politics of privatization. The commodification of urban space meant that sexual cultures—including gay spaces—have been increasingly reduced to privatized spaces of consumption. Gay neighborhoods such as New York City’s Village or San Francisco’s Castro became tourist attractions and shopping/entertainment enclaves, capitalizing on the image of gay and lesbians as affluent, stylish consumers and taste-makers. Rather than representing vice or perversity as they had for most of the twentieth century, gays at the turn of the new millennium, David Bell and Jon Dinneen argue, were increasingly “cast as model citizens of the urban’solen, contributing towards the gentrification of commodifiable spaces of consumption, residential and commercial areas. As the same time, spaces for queers of color, queer youth, or poor queer—such as New York City’s Chelsea—were razed and replaced with locked and gated parks and new condominium complexes. Redevelopment is about fanning off unwanted colored [and queer] bodies. As such, they have benefited from and reinforced neoliberal capitalist restructuring: the massive

We therefore cannot look only at gains in “cultural visibility” for LGBT people to measure political and social progress. Historically, increased media visibility has been “directly connected to the criminalization of black people, trans people, people of color, and people doing sex work.” Reim Gossens argues, because visibility projects tend to reinforce existing modes of sexual respectability. This same dynamic exists today: the rise of media representation of trans women of color in 2014 and 2015, Gossen argues, corresponds to the highest recorded Murder rates of those same women. LGBT campaigns for visibility—in the form of media visibility, marketing recognition, new gay-orientated business developments, or social recognition—have depended on the invisibility, criminalization, and abjection of queer others. As such, we have benefited from and reinforced neoliberal capitalist restructuring: the massive

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As with marriage rights and consumer citizenship, gay gentrification marks the triumph of the neoliberal discourses of gay liberation and social justice movements from the 1960s. As Dragun argues, in the era of New Neoconservatism, “equality” becomes narrow, formal acts
to a few conserving institutions, 'freedom' becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the 'right to privacy' becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped... Welcome to the New World Order! 176 Welcome to neoliberalism.

The Ends of Neoliberalism?

After the Great Recession of 2008, some scholars suggested that neoliberalism was over—that deregulation, speculation, and free-market policies that brought about this most recent crisis had been discredited. Most now agree that reports of its death were premature. Since neoliberalism has, for decades, transformed the way that the state creates and sustains new subjects and social relations best suited to new markets, the historical transformations that I detail in this essay—especially perhaps movement goals and visions—are not easily displaced. Other scholars have argued that the language of freedom and choice so central to neoliberal ideology might be in retreat, or at least overwhelmed by a new emphasis on safety, security, and policing, especially after the events of 9/11. Susan Hyatt, for example, argues that "the idealised subject of neoliberal policy was the citizen-consumer who was 'responsible' to make wise and prudent choices in the 'free market' of utilities and services, shopping, and schooling. In contrast, the idealised subject of the law-and-order state is now the citizen who both policies and agrees to be policed." Still other argue that the central state—the explosive growth of the prison-industrial complex and new state security and surveillance apparatuses—is a continuation of, rather than a departure from, neoliberal policies.

In LGBT politics, the post 9/11 remarks a transition from homonormativity to whatJudie 116 Perry has called "homonationalism"—the alignment of respectable LGBT citizen-subjects with the state and against other queer subjects, such as the terrorist, the criminal, the poet, and the undocumented, who face the hardest legal and catalagical techniques of the state and its related corporate interests. As Karina Chávez argues, homonational logics that accept US state militarization as a prerequisite for national belonging at work not only in campaigns such as the fight to repeal "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," but also in mainstream LGBT immigration politics. By prioritizing familial resurrection, such campaigns emphasized respectable, "decriminalizing" same-sex national families with higher income levels, allowing offers to languish in militarized detention facilities; by supporting the DREAM Act, organizations accepted that conditional permanent residency would only extend to those youth who, among other criteria, present "a clean criminal record and thus good moral standing" and attend either two years of college or serve at least two years in the military. Another way homonationalism is pressed into the service of the state is through "pinkwashing," the use of gay-friendly images (such as tourist ads) to promote "the subject as relevant and modern. In Israel and the US, even while hyper-securitized borders and an increasing surveillance-oriented state targets queer people for social death, pinkwashing perpetuates a civilizing narrative that justifies ongoing settler colonialism, occupation, and militarization in the name of anti-apoliticism. These developments make use of and build upon neoliberal modes of extraction, securitization, and citizenship.

A final critique of neoliberalism concerns its utility as a concept. Some scholars, such as Catherine Knight and Jeff Manosevich, and John Clarke, have argued that "neoliberalism" has become a catchword, overused in scholarship that treats it as an abstract concept or actor in the world, rather than as a partial and unstable process. Others argue that "particularities and local categories and meanings" can be "correct where everything is subsumed in the framework of neoliberalism." Still, there is a need for studies that take up neoliberalism not as a monolith, but as an assembled bundle of mobile calculative techniques of governing" in order to better understand divergent LGBT queer projects and histories. 177 These debates on the term itself reflect ongoing desires to better understand, historicize and critique the devastating effects of global capitalism has had over the past forty years. In these projects, and more as a critique. Yet as we survey the impact neoliberal logics have had on the LGBT movement and queer culture since the 1970s, I think one of the greatest risks comes in neoliberalism's characteristic ability to enrol critique, recasting politics as freedom for the entrepreneurial self in the market. The absorption of social differences into new markets that I explored throughout this essay also plays out in the academy, where "politicalized intellectuals" and market mentality—has, as Dean Spade argues, "come with enormous costs": missed opportunities for coalition and the alienation of those who are marginal to regimes of homophobia and state violence.188 A critique of neoliberalism is therefore essential not only to LGBT communities and politics might help as a way to rethink the very systems that undermine distributional justice and gender. I mean the left, feminist, and queer resistance to neoliberal sexual politics that has spearheaded by those most affected by these transformations—those who live in the intersections of economic precarity, racialized and gendered sexual responsibility politics; those whose lives are not protected by dignified marriage, respectable consumer citizenship, or stable same-sex legal protection. It is to ask as a cultural analyst to learn from these thinker and activists, to defamiliarize queer resistance to neoliberal sexual politics has been spearheaded by those most affected by these transformations: those who live in the intersections of economic precarity, racialized and gendered sexual responsibility politics; those whose lives are not protected by dignified marriage, respectable consumer citizenship, or stable same-sex legal protection. It is to ask as a cultural analyst to learn from these thinker and activists, to defamiliarize...
For an exploratory narrative on narrative culture and politics, see, in this volume, Marc Stem, "Crooked and Perverse" Narratives of History, 2013.

Don Romesburg, "Where She Comes From: A Brief History of Neo/1beralism, 2003), 50.


Manuelzon, 151.


Gutiérrez, "Queer and Nation." 116

See also, in this volume, Eithne Luibheid, "Queer and Nation." 116


Ganti, "Neo/1beralism," 99.

Ong, Neo/1beralism as Exception, 14 (2011): 107.

Further Reading


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