The (Subtly) Questioned Love: A Love Exile in Sweden

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To be a homosexual in any homophobic country is like living in exile. If you are not open about your sexual orientation, you do not feel at home: the surrounding social environment seems to be heterosexual through and through. It is an internal exile, however, and you can actually live safely in a tight lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) subculture as long as you do not come out of the closet. If you do come out, you can only blame yourself. Doing so is like openly moving to the margins of the society and officially becoming a stranger. Moreover, you are constantly forced to explain yourself (Sedgwick 1993, 46). Understandably, the most viable and popular alternative is to remain in the closet and live in internal exile while maintaining your straight appearance.

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To live in the lie (and safety) of the closet never seemed to be an option for me when I lived in Latvia, in part because I was almost never harassed by gay-bashers. It happened just once, when a bartender could not stand to see me kissing my boyfriend and threw a towel at me, shouting: “Stop it, you faggot!” I am indeed lucky, because, after discussing homosexuality on TV talk shows, two of my openly gay friends were harassed by neo-Nazi bullies in the street. Some of my other acquaintances experienced a direct confrontation with an angry antigay mob when they tried to march in Gay Pride parades. Others told me about how people from the organization No-Pride had thrown small packages neatly filled with human excrement at the Riga Gay Pride marchers in 2006. From my home in Sweden, I read in online newspapers how the police were forced to seal off the area where the Gay Pride event took place because of the threats the marchers had received. And this does not even take into account all the legal battles between the gay advocacy group and the Riga City Council, which had barred the Gay Pride events on the grounds of potential security risks.

Europeanization reversed?

LGBT issues are just a marginal part of Latvian identity politics. Instead, Latvian politics are focused on the ethnic segregation of the so-called Russophone minority, which has led some to call Latvia an “ethnic democracy” or “ethnocracy” (Linz and Stepan 1996, 408). In other words, although Latvia entered the exclusive club of the European Union in 2004, it continues to segregate its own people using various legal categories. In 2006, Latvia became the first European state to introduce a constitutional amendment stating that marriage is a union between men and women, thus officially making it the first European heterocracy, in which a heterosexual majority enshrined their social supremacy in the Constitution.

While I cannot offer a scientific explanation for this phenomenon, let me suggest an explanatory hypothesis. During the preaccession period, when the country prepared for EU membership, the relationship between Latvia and the European Union could be characterized as an “asymmetrical interdependence” (Moravcsik and Vachudova 2002, 1): the European Union dictated the conditions for accession unilaterally, and Latvia was forced to adapt to EU norms. As a result of these pressures, Latvia initiated many legislative changes in the field of protection for minorities, which were not always popular. This was a rationally calculated adaptation, however, because the external incentives for EU membership were stronger than the domestic opposition (Schimmelfennig, Engert, and Knobel 2005).
The same Europeanization processes that led to positive changes in the field of ethnic minority protection seem to have unleashed a backlash after the accession. The liberalizing processes that were tolerated during the preaccession phase empowered a loose antigay coalition consisting of the local Catholic, Lutheran, and Orthodox churches, and the Christian fundamentalist sect Jaunā paaudze (New generation), on the one hand, and the nationalist extremists, on the other hand. This coalition framed the liberalizing processes in terms of pollution of the Latvian nation, with nationalist extremists and their religious allies arguing that Europe had imported the un-Latvian “sin” of homosexuality.

This popular homophobia has been employed masterfully by one of the establishment parties—Latvijas Pirmā Partija (Latvia’s First party)—to normalize the antigay rhetoric that has been an important leitmotif in its Christian right-wing ideology ever since. These homophobic attitudes are widespread in the country. For instance, a recent poll shows that 62 percent of respondents consider homosexuality to be morally unacceptable.1 Interestingly, some of my acquaintances have noted that Latvians and Russians, finally, are unified in their hatred of gays. However, this backlash has also generated a backlash of its own, with some positive consequences: a pro-LGBT advocacy group was established as a response to the hateful reception of the first Gay Pride parade in 2005.

Sweden: A safe haven for love exiles?

Shortly before the first Gay Pride parade in Riga, I left Latvia to pursue my master’s degree in Sweden. Certainly, the elite universities were situated in the United States. But in the George W. Bush era, the country was hardly known as particularly tolerant. Indeed, as if to confirm Richard Florida’s (2005) thesis—that tolerant and growth-oriented urban areas attract more LGBT persons—I chose to study at a Swedish university because I believed the social climate would be more gay-friendly there.

Sweden has historically been hailed as an example of a golden middle way between the paths of communism and raw capitalism (see, e.g., Childs 1948). For me, as a political scientist, this Scandinavian country was an instance of a democratic ideal. Indeed, it was a perfect destination for a Latvian do-gooder like me, who at the time was working for a Latvian anticorruption organization, to study democratic development.

And I was content with my study period in Uppsala, a cozy Scandinavian university town. My academic development was supplemented with happiness in my personal life. I started dating a man who, some months later, asked for my hand. We married a year later. Indeed, I may now be classified as a love exile. However, I soon realized that even though I had moved to a country that is supposedly sexually liberal and tolerant of LGBT people, my love can still be called into question, just in a slightly subtler manner.

Certainly, Sweden may seem sexually liberal. Very few here dare to use the word “faggot.” Protection against hate crimes is part of government discourse. When hate crimes occur, offenders are severely punished. So-called fag jokes are regarded as sexual harassment. It almost seems that sexual orientation is not really an issue in modern Swedish society. Or is it?

It is a commonsense observation that most Western societies are heteronormative, that heterosexuality is a ruling social norm. This social norm also regulates relations between homosexual individuals, as Anna Norberg (2009) demonstrates in her work on the everyday practices of Swedish gay and lesbian couples. According to Norberg, homosexual couples speak about their everyday lives as if they are speaking about a perfectly gender-equal, heterosexual relationship. Traditionally, gender equality has been very strong in Scandinavia, and Swedish public discourse on gender equality in everyday life stresses, among other things, the equal division of domestic labor. Norberg argues that the gay and lesbian couples she interviewed tried to avoid the usual stereotypes about gays and lesbians having certain gender roles (i.e., that one of the partners is seen as a man and the other as a woman). They did so by speaking about how equally they divided their domestic labor duties. This, Norberg argues, indicates that talk about the gender equality (which may seem paradoxical in homosexual relationships) might serve as a legitimizing strategy for LGBT couples to appear more (hetero)normal.

In my opinion, these efforts to appear more normal by adhering to the heteronormative discourse are just another, less flagrant, form of gay oppression. Homosexual Swedes are considered less normal if they do not conform to the core heterosexual norm and therefore face social sanctions. As Gayle Rubin (1993) has argued, Western societies divide sexual behavior into so-called sex hierarchies: while heterosexuality tops the hierarchy, there is an area of contestation that includes, for instance, promiscuous heterosexuals; stable, long-term homosexual relationships; and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, there is “bad sex” (14), for instance, sex for money, cross-generational sex, fetishism, and so on. It is my impression
that the gender-equal heterosexual relationship tops the Swedish sex hierarchy, with the “gender-equal” homosexual relationship next in the hierarchy of normality.

I recall a party at which my Swedish colleagues were discussing (heterosexual) dating Web sites. It soon became clear that none of them approved of Internet dating. Afterward, a male colleague very innocently asked me where I had met my husband. Among those listening, several turned sour when I replied that I had met him online. The colleague who had posed the question seemed to realize the peculiarity of the situation and exclaimed: “I knew that there are also normal people who meet online!” An awkward silence fell over the room.

Generally, it seems that a warning should be issued: Sweden’s gender-neutral, gay-friendly appearances can be deceiving. American anthropologist Don Kulick, who spent a large part of his academic career in Sweden, wrote a bitter piece (Kulick 2005) on state intervention in the field of sexual morality. He identified the good “official sexuality, a national sexuality” (206), which is contrasted to the “bad” sexuality (224), for instance, the criminal act of purchasing sexual services. He also describes the intolerant environment of the academic debates surrounding the official ideology of gender equality (e.g., the debate around criminalizing the purchase of sexual services), which, as he hints, is a norm that is not supposed be questioned. According to Kulick, Sweden is far from being the sexually liberated country that it was declared in the 1960s.

In conclusion, I should acknowledge that there are enormous differences between Sweden and Latvia. For instance, it makes a huge difference whether a person is harassed physically because he is identified as the other, a homosexual deviant, or whether someone “just” experiences awkward silences when he does not conform to what is considered (hetero)normal. However, one cannot deny that in both cases one’s love is called into question. While it is done in a more physically and existentially threatening way in Latvia, the Swedish social control questions one’s normality in a much subtler manner by framing what is (hetero)normal and therefore what is compliant with the official Swedish view of good sexuality.

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References


