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Against Tolerance

Islam, sexuality, and the politics of belonging in the Netherlands

Paul Mepschen

Sex seems to play a key role in the Dutch politics of belonging. Sex – especially homosexuality – is instrumentalized by the nationalist right who uses it to represent immigrants as ‘strangers’ who threaten tolerant, modern, Dutch society. Tolerance, power, and xenophobia come to be increasingly entwined in the Netherlands. A plea against ‘tolerance’ as the foundation for political and social struggle.

The Slovenian philosopher and sociologist Slavoj Žižek argues that tolerance constitutes a mystifying discourse veiling what is really at the heart of political and social struggle. There is good reason, Žižek argues, that someone like Martin Luther King didn't make use of the concept. The struggle against racism is not a struggle for tolerance, but for social, economic, political, and cultural rights, and for changing unjust and undemocratic power relations. Žižek makes a parallel with feminism, asking if feminists struggle to be ‘tolerated’ by men. Of course not – from this perspective the concept of tolerance even becomes rather ridiculous.

Tolerance, in other words, does not work as an imperative for political struggle. As the American left political philosopher Wendy Brown argues, tolerance is a discourse of power which possesses a certain “magnanimity” and plays a key role in dynamics of in- and exclusion in liberal societies. Moreover, holding on to tolerance as the foundation for one's engagement in struggle is what may keep the LGBT-movement from reinventing itself in an era in which globalization, the global spread of neoliberal capitalism, and the rise of Islamophobia, are radically changing what is demanded of our movements; how our struggles relate to other struggles; to the state; and to dominant liberal discourses. While the situation in the Netherlands provides perhaps the most cardinal example of the entanglement of LGBT-politics with racism and Islamophobia, the challenges we face in the Netherlands because of this strange co-optation of homosexuality by nationalists and Islam-bashers are mirrored in other parts of the world and cannot be understood without taking into account the ideologies embellishing the global onslaught against Islam.

The El-Moumni affair and beyond

In the Netherlands, LGBT-politics has largely come to be reduced to the question of a perceived lack of tolerance toward homosexuals among Muslims. The discourse that is put forward is one in which native Dutch citizens are construed as tolerant while society's cultural ‘others’, especially Muslims, are represented as intolerant.

Homophobia is construed to be alien to Dutch, modern, secular, society. The structural heteronormativity of society has almost completely disappeared from the movement's discourse and from the struggle, while the question of Islam and tolerance has taken front-stage.

What could be wrong with tolerance? Would I perhaps prefer intolerance? Of course not, but if we would take a harder look at the concept and the way it was employed, we would be able to see that tolerance has a paradoxical meaning in present day society. It is accompanied, in fact, by virulent forms of intolerance and exclusion. To illustrate, we may have a look at the debate about Islam in the Netherlands starting in 2001. The Rotterdam imam El-Moumni, of Moroccan descent, in May 2001 made comments on national television arguing that homosexuality was an illness threatening reproduction and thus society in more general terms: classic patriarchal views. The comments caused enormous upheaval in Dutch society, in which people especially took offense because these views came from a cultural other, from ‘the outside’. The imam's expressed views were taken to be comments on Dutch secular and modern society. In fact, only three years earlier, in 1998, during the Gay Games in Amsterdam, public homosexuality was fiercely debated in the Dutch public sphere. Several Dutch conservatives participated in that debate, arguing, among other things, that homosexuality was shameful and that they felt uncomfortable or offended by the public display of homosexuality during the games. Interestingly, Muslims played no role in this debate, and neither did the question of Islam in more general terms.

In 2001, on the other hand, the comments of El-Moumni were framed as 'intolerant', diametrically opposed to Dutch values, and construed as symbolic of the lack on cultural integration of Muslim communities in Dutch societies. The imam's views, characteristic of conservative views on homosexuality in orthodox religious circles, were framed as representative of the whole of the Muslim community instead as the views of a specific, radical, current in Islam (El-Moumni belongs to a notoriously conservative mosque in Rotterdam). In public discourse, Islam became construed as completely and utterly antagonistic to modern, tolerant, Dutch 'values' and all the imams active in the Netherlands – including imams from the liberal Alavite community who have nothing whatsoever in common with orthodox figures like El-Moumni – were 'invited' for a lesson in tolerance by the liberal democratic minister of 'large cities-affairs'. One of the prime participants in the attack on public homosexuality in 1998, the conservative columnist Van der List, who called homosexuality disgusting, in 2001 embraced the homosexual community that now needed protection against the horrible Muslim hordes who were a threat to liberal, tolerant, Dutchness.

A visibly uncomfortable prime-minister Kok spent the full ten minutes of his weekly interview on national television explaining to Muslims that they were to tolerate homosexuals, as this "was the Dutch way". In a poll on the website of the largest Gay magazine, the mainstream, liberal populist Gay Krant, 91 percent of participants agreed with the statement that "Muslims should accept our tolerance or leave". The widely read right-wing daily Telegraaf spoke of ideas coming from "the medieval deserts of Northern Africa" and gay members of the conservative liberal party VVD in Amsterdam published a pamphlet arguing that Muslims were threatening the liberal freedoms that were so characteristic to Dutch society.

Aesthetics of homosexuality

The message was clear: to be Dutch meant to adjust to certain 'norms and values' and to assimilate into the moral universe that constituted modern, tolerant Dutch society. Tolerance became one of the prime markers of 'autochthony'. Helped by the events of 9/11, the single most successful right-wing populist in Dutch history, Pim Fortuyn, who as the reader may recall was brutally killed in 2002, instrumentalized this discourse of tolerant Dutchness to make his spectacular political staging possible. As a columnist, publicist, and public speaker, Fortuyn had tried for many years to get the Islamophobic, xenophobic, and nationalist view across that Muslims were retarded, that Dutch identity and modernity needed to be reappraised, and that the borders needed to be closed to immigrants, especially Muslims. For a long time, his views were seen as rather ludicrous and marginal, but during the 1990's they slowly moved from the far right margins to the center of Dutch politics.

The right-wing populist party Livable Netherlands catapulted Fortuyn into the political arena in 2001. Fortuyn combined a personal, almost erotic, political aesthetic and charisma with neonationalist and Islamophobic political ideas and fulfilled a deep desire for belonging, meaning, direction, a closed and clear identity, and an ever more strictly defined definition of 'the other'. Fortuyn wanted to embody the modern, free, tolerant, Dutch nation and did so by liberating the sexual norms and the aesthetics of part of the international and Dutch gay male community from the gay ghetto and bringing them into the Dutch public domain. As an essential part of this political discourse, Muslims were represented by Fortuyn as the exact opposites of the free, liberal, modern Dutch person. The former were represented as intolerant, primitive, and traditional, a triangle of alterity that made them quite incongruous with Dutch society. Obviously, the mass mediation of the homophobic comments of various orthodox Islamic figures in Dutch society like El-Moumni, and various affairs concerning visceral forms of homophobia in Muslim circles, helped Fortuyn greatly by reinforcing his point. Fortuyn's recipe against what he dubbed 'the agrarian backwardness' of Islam: getting Dutch society back on the path of modernity and secularism through harsh integration policies and closed borders. Power and tolerance became completely entangled and emerged as a weapon in the hands of the populist and Islamophobic right.

Everyday homophobia

Would we turn our attention to the nationalist right in the Netherlands today, the politics of Geert Wilders' Freedom Party or several populist right-wing media and Internet publications, we would see that tolerance is

not quite characteristic of the politics of the far right. The tolerance towards homosexuality, merely discursive as opposed to practiced in everyday life, is accompanied by a growing intolerance toward Muslims and other immigrants, social outsiders, the poor. The culture of the Muslim minority is framed as an essential, natural, uniform, and a-historical whole while homophobia is construed to be alien to Dutch society. That narrative has rooted itself ever more deeply into Dutch society. As opposed to 1998, during the gay games – not very long ago – it is almost impossible today to imagine discussing LGBT-rights without bashing Islam and Muslims. The hegemonic narrative is that gay and lesbian emancipation is almost complete – as gays and lesbians are ‘tolerated’- and that the only problem left is the lack of integration of Muslims into Dutch society. However, the facts are quite different. Research shows that the official tolerance informing the self-image of the Dutch and ‘Dutch pride’ is not always congruous with the facts. Confronted with public homosexuality – like two men kissing – a large part of the population still responds with disgust and distaste. Sometimes this disgust leads to violence. While it is true that young Moroccan men are overrepresented among the perpetrators of homophobic violence in Amsterdam, research shows that this behavior cannot be reduced to the culture or religion of the young men involved. In fact, it is their social exclusion and marginality that is a more prominent candidate for blame.

Normalization

What causes the disgust mentioned above is heteronormativity, which is still a structural, essential aspect of Dutch society and moral order. In other words, heterosexuality remains the self-evident norm, a normativity which is reproduced through the family, in the educational system, popular culture, and media. The tolerated homosexual fits this heteronormativity very well: in almost every way he behaves according to heteronormative norms. As Steven Seidman says, the emphasis on tolerance has normalized homosexuality. The modern homosexual changed from a deviant, excluded other into the mirror-image of the ideal heterosexual. In a 2001 article on normalization, Seidman argues: "Normalization is made possible because it simultaneously reproduces a dominant order of gender, intimate, economic, and national practices". He warns: "[L]egitimation through normalization leaves in place the polluted status of these marginal sexualities and all the norms that regulate our sexual intimate conduct apart from the norm of heterosexuality". He also points out: "Ultimately, normalization [renders] sexual difference a minor, superficial aspect of a self who in every other way reproduces an ideal of a national citizen".

As argued, many people in the Netherlands still look the other way, disgusted, shamed, when confronted with homosexuality in public. In such a heteronormative culture it needs not surprise that many homosexual men and women are depressed; that suicide rates among young gays and lesbians remain high; that transgenderism and other forms of gender nonconformity are ridiculed and transgenders are excluded; that violence keeps threatening the LGBT-community. The solution for such problems is not a politics based on tolerance, but on the struggle against heteronormativity.

In recent articles, the feminist philosopher Judith Butler rightly and harshly criticizes the confusion of sexual politics with the politics of empire and argues for a kind of sexual politics that resists Islamophobia, racism, and imperialism and that tries to find convergence points of antiracism and LGBT-struggles. Unfortunately, Butler doesn't elaborate much. It is the task, it seems to me, of critical, antiracist, queer movements to think about and develop on forms of sexual politics beyond tolerance, against tolerance. The heteronormative society radical queers are fighting is the very society that excludes and discriminates against immigrants. Convergence points exist, for instance in the field of education where there is every reason to fight against both implicit heterosexuality as well as against the structural disadvantaging of girls and immigrant kids. Antiracists and LGBT-activists may also find each other in solidarity with LGBT's from minority communities and in solidarity with homosexual refugees and their rights.

The reader may perhaps ask herself whether the author of the present article has gone mad. Isn't the Netherlands in fact one of the 'best' countries to live in for lesbians or gay men, because they have in fact gained rights and a certain amount of acceptance and demanded their place in the public domain? Of course, this is true, and the gains of LGBT's in the Netherlands must be defended and the public kiss-ins and similar actions organized by queers in response to homophobia must be supported and participated in. But we need a movement that is more than just responsive but that tries to constantly reinvent itself to fight the exclusion of

deviant sexualities as effectively as possible, while doing everything to resist the instrumentalization of our struggles in the 'war against terror' and the ongoing onslaught against the Muslim community. I do not argue for intolerance, but for re-imagining political struggles in such a way that the structural causes of exclusion, discrimination, and violence assume center-stage again, for a queer movement that takes up the struggle against heterosexual normativity. Tolerance is ideology. We do not fight to become tolerated but to change the world. Tolerance is an ideological construct that disarms the LGBT-movement and positions us against as opposed to alongside 'other' oppressed minorities.

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