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Identity Politics Reloaded: Competing for Victim Status in German Memorial Debates

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Abstract:

In December 2003 the German government agreed to build a memorial for the homosexual victims of Nazi persecution, following five years of intense lobbying by gay interest groups. This paper will examine their arguments. What is at stake in these debates? Does a gay-specific memorial risk rendering invisible the existence of, for example Jewish or communist gays, and lesbians in particular, or, alternately, rehabilitating gay Nazis? The trend towards claiming Germans themselves as victims of the Nazi system can be widely observed in contemporary German culture. Such a trend draws upon discourses developed within classical identity politics. Situating the discussion within the context of competition over victimhood, I hope to examine such a campaign's function for the German gay mainstream movement at large.



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In this paper I want to examine the German LGBT mainstream movement's lobby politics for the realisation of a memorial, dedicated to the homosexual victims of National Socialism. I want to scrutinise and deconstruct the function of this approach towards history for the German LGBT movement.

I by no means intend to deny the persecution and suffering of gays under the Nazi regime. But my perspective as White German queer feminist demands a highly sceptical approach to German mainstream debates of NS history.

I will focus on the campaign "Remember the homosexual Victims of National Socialism". I chose this particular campaign partly because it provides an excellent presswork and its publications are easily accessible,¹ but primarily because it represents the opinion and policy of the LSVD, the biggest and most influential German LGBT organisation, and therefore – assumable – the majority of homosexual identified German people.²

First, I am going to introduce the campaign "Remember the homosexual Victims of National Socialism" and then add a brief summary of my theoretical background. Thereafter, I want to consider the consequences of these reflections for Germany's LGBT movement. After that, I am going to debate what the turn towards history might mean for identity-based movements in general and Germany's LGBT mainstream in particular. Finally, I will try to summarise my outcomes and formulate some prospects.

The Initiative »Remember the homosexual Victims of National Socialism«

The initiative campaigns for a memorial site to the persecuted homosexual victims of National Socialism since 2001. The campaign hopes that the 'monument should set a signal against intolerance, animosity towards and the ostracism of gays and lesbians.'

The campaign is a classical lobby organisation. The two main pillars of its work are public relations and public actions. It constantly publishes press releases to either announce an action, or prompt the government to take responsibility for the recognition of homosexual

¹ However, it proved difficult to narrow the discussion to that campaign because as a lobby organisation the initiative demonstrates a defused version of the medial discussion I had an insight to. The sometimes startling anti-Semitic debate is broken down to its major – read: less controversial - aspects. A general analysis of German gay media debates would probably unearth more conspicuous and debatable results.

² This is an assumption of mine that refers to "German Germans". I cannot estimate the popular positions amongst for example Jewish or Turkish people living in Germany – regardless of their citizenship.

victims by designing a memorial. Campaign actions mostly comprise hours of commemoration for the homosexual prisoners of the concentration camp Sachsenhausen, close to Berlin.

Theorising Identity

In order to scrutinise the campaign's work, I will use critical analyses of identity politics by Judith Butler and Wendy Brown.

Judith Butler has argued that every identity needs its Other or Outside to define itself. In this logic, homosexuality is the constituting Other, the so-called "abject", of the heterosexual norm. But what happens when this abject demands subject status? What, when the Outside forms an identity of its own? Those politicized identities are subject to the same identity forming mechanisms. Every identity-based movement struggles to define who must remain outside in order to constitute an identity of its own.³ Butler locates this Other at the margins. But I want to examine lobby politics and thus concentrate on the movement's relationship to dominant society.

Hence, I turned to Wendy Brown's analysis of the emergence of identity politics (or in her terms: politicised identity) in late modern Western societies. Brown focuses on another constituting Outside/Other of politicised identity: the actual Inside against which abjected identities must define. She states that liberal and capitalist systems deploy a particular kind of identity politics which primarily concentrates on protesting against exclusion from dominant society and which demands realisation of the liberal promise of universal justice. However, what Brown questions is the very desirability of inclusion in a system that re-inscribes the dominant system as its measure. She points out that the middle class is the implicit ideal to which all politicised identities refer in order to prove their exclusion. Politicised identities always 'require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence' (Brown, 1995, p.65). Identity in that sense is always a victim identity and thus, as she says, 'becomes deeply invested in its own impotence' (Brown, 1995, p.70).

³ Fiercely disputed in feminist circles was and is for example the status of transsexual or transgendered women for their impugned femininity, or the status of *butch* and *femme* lesbians for their impugned loyalty with women's emancipation.

Germany's LGBT movement

In the case of gay civil rights movements this simply means that the universal claim of liberalism remains unquestioned while gays and lesbians demand the same rights as other citizens. They want access to rights and institutions like marriage with its family health insurance, tax advantages and right to adopt. But they do not broach the fact that not everyone in the movement will profit from such achievements, or that homosexuals might not be the only ones (and in Germany by no way the most affected) excluded from civil rights. Nor does this politics challenge liberalism's universal "we" as a strategic fiction of hegemonic groups (cp. Brown, 1995, p.64).

The gay movement in Germany can be said to have achieved lots of these claims. I do not suggest that lesbians and gays in Germany are not discriminated anymore. But gay cannot longer be called an abject identity either. Since 2001 there is the possibility to register civil partnerships for homosexual couples. The mayors of Hamburg and Berlin are gay. The Berlin Gay Pride – the Christopher Street Day – is sponsored by Coca Cola. At least partly the movement has arrived in the centre of German society. This is notably to be seen in the discussion about the motto of this year's Christopher Street Day: It was supposed to be "Unity and Right and Freedom" – the first line of the German national anthem. Only after a great deal of protest by queer and left political activists it was partly changed to "Diversity and Right and Freedom".

Supposing that Brown's assumptions are applicable for the contemporary German context, what are the consequences for the gay movement? If gay identity is rooted in the exclusion from the discursive formation of universal justice – what happens when this exclusion starts to crumble? If politicised identities require the exclusion from a universal ideal for their very existence, will gay identity dissolve the more rights gays and lesbians gain? If politicised identity needs victim status in order to sustain itself, what are the German LGBT movement's tactics to maintain its identity after full legal equality is achieved?

My thesis is that one of the tactics to deal with that problematic is the recourse on German history in form of lobbying for a memorial for the persecution of gays under the Nazi Regime. What are the advantages of such a step?

Identity and History

Wendy Brown refers to Nietzsche when she writes about the role of history for politicised identities. Nietzsche describes the preoccupation with history as “angry spectatorship”, because one is powerless against what had happened. By constructing an identity whose past is one of unredeemable injury, ‘identity becomes attached to its own exclusion’ (Brown, 1995, p.73). As long as the identity is invested in this past, it cannot redeem the injury, but giving up its investment would mean to give up the identity as such. As Brown states:

Politicized identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain. (Brown, 1995, pp.73-74)

In the light of this analysis, the German LGBT movement secured its victim status and therefore its own preservation indefinitely by the recourse to German history. This is indeed a complicated move. On the one hand one cannot deny that homosexuals were persecuted under the Nazi regime. On the other hand, even though the victim group “gay men” is not an invention of post war LGBT movements, it is certainly a construction that seeks to unify a very diverse assemblage. This is not just because any identity is a unification, but also because in the context of National Socialism in Germany one cannot avoid talking about anti-Semitism and the Shoa. And no German discussion about National Socialism must avoid addressing the German perpetrators. But this is exactly what the campaign does. Its press releases talk about the German responsibility towards the Nazi victims as if their members were not Germans themselves. It seems with their victim status gays cease to be part of the nation.

It is typical for German discussions to distinguish between Germans and Nazis. This manoeuvre suggests that the entirety of Germans is not guilty for what happened. Instead, the Federal Republic of Germany is declared as exclusively liable for debating German history and responsibility. Finally, this does not just lead to a negation of German guilt but turns the German people itself into the virtual victims of the Nazis and culminates in formulations like, “We were liberated by the Allied Forces in 1945.” We: the Germans, not Europe, not the Jewish survivors of the concentration camps etc.

This attitude is clearly reflected within the initiative. Not a single one of their declarations even mentions that to be German and gay in Nazi Germany might have been a riven

identity, let alone the not researched question of how many active Nazis became victims when the Nazis bowdlerised their own ranks. The story of Ernst Röhm for example is not addressed by the initiative. The execution of the gay commander of the paramilitary organisation of the German Nazi Party – the SA – was officially presented as defeat of a putsch planned by Röhm. However, the public also read it as a cleaning of the SA from homosexuality. In fact this modification of the story is supported by Hitler who commanded on 30th of June in 1934 ‘that all SA leaders scrupulously take care that violations of §175 [the anti-gay paragraph] are to be answered with immediate exclusion from the SA and the NSDAP’ (quoted in Stedefeldt, 2004, my translation). In succession of the execution, §175 was sharpened significantly to its final version.

Could the memorial for gay victims become a site where gay Neo-Nazis can commemorate their “mistakenly” murdered idols? The campaign might not embrace this reading of their project but currently they do nothing to oppose it. One could even argue that just by not addressing the issue of gay perpetrators they support it nevertheless. In their appeal they stress the fact that for ‘homosexuals the years spent under Nazi rule meant a life of enforced self-denial, permanent danger, and fear of being discovered or betrayed’.

Interestingly, the German version of the appeal emphasises the fact that this applies not just to homosexuals but to the ‘entirety of homosexuals’. What does this “entirety” suggest?

This formulation may be meant to include gays who were not actually detected by the Nazis. Or it may be meant to include lesbians. Women were pursued and forced to live in “masquerade”, but they were not included in §175 in Germany. However, the campaign is not concerned with the situation of lesbians during National Socialism, since its focus is on victims of this paragraph. In fact, there is no reason at all why the memorial is not dedicated to gay male instead of homosexual victims. Finally and most startling, “entirety” could be read as reference to gay active Nazis, who had to live in fear as well.

A benevolent interpretation of this focus on victimhood could see an attempt to be as inclusive as possible. After all, murdered is murdered and nobody asks for the ideological attitude of Jewish victims either. But what gets lost in this perspective is the experience of men who matched more than one attribute persecuted by the Nazis: The very existence of Jewish gay men is never mentioned on the initiative’s website since the campaign focuses on the

exclusively homosexual prisoners: the ones with the pink triangle. Jewish gays were not imprisoned and killed for their sexuality but as Jews in the first place.

I appreciate the initiative's engagement in uncovering particular homophobic motivated persecution, but I consider its narrowing of politics of remembrances indefensible and dangerous. To disregard the involvement of homosexuals in the Nazi system eventually equals gay Jews with gay Nazis.

Rather than distancing gay from Jewish victims, the interconnections of anti-Semitic and homophobic persecution should be examined. It was a popular argument among Nazis that homosexuality is an "un-German Jewish plague" that emasculates men and weakens the blood of the German people. This way of thinking was not just popular with self-declared Nazis. Friedrich Radszuweit, board director of the "Alliance for Human Rights" – the biggest homosexual organisation in the Weimar Republic – was convinced that the *Völkische Beobachter* (newspaper of the NSDAP) does not want to

condemn homosexuals or proclaim them as pariah of society, but by and large, really always wants to strike the Jewry (especially Magnus Hirschfeld), who in an ill-favoured manner drag human sex life into the public by means of the most brutal expressions (quoted in Stedefeldt, 2000, p.21, my translation).

Furthermore he appealed to the paper to accept that homosexuality was not a "Jewish plague". I do not want to suggest that this was the opinion of all members. But it does not do justice to the debate to deny anti-Semitic or Nazi tendencies in the German pre-war gay movement.

Perspectives

So what does it mean to do "identity politics after identity"? What are possible solutions for the dilemma identity politics are trapped in?

I agree with Brown who states that giving up the investment in the past cannot be considered a solution. History must be memorised, every other tactic supports restorative and conservative agendas. After all, nobody can choose the own identity in a supermarket. Subjects are subjects precisely because they are positioned by a discourse and not because they choose to be oppressed.

I also think a critical engagement with National Socialism is imperative for Germans in general, and for those Germans, occupied with connecting their identity to groups who were

persecuted, in particular. However, their research must be connected to the analyses of other victim groups. Furthermore, the advantages of being defined an “Aryan” German must be taken into account.

After deconstructing identity as an entity, it is not possible to classify the world solely in terms of victims and perpetrators any longer. The debate around the memorial for the Gay Nazi victims clearly demonstrates that the reality of politics is much more complex. Race, nationality, gender, and sexual orientation are inextricable interlinked, and a solely victim discussion does not do justice to the debate. But to avoid talking about oppression and who profits from unequal power relations cannot be the solution either. The challenge might be to find ways of constructing identities that do not repeat the moment of injury. In this context this must mean to cease focussing exclusively on gay victimhood. This is not the same as negating the experience of the victims, but rather taking responsibility. This would mean not to focus on a memorial so much. The monument is an important but nevertheless exclusively symbolic project. There is no space in it for developing a politics of deeds as opposed to moralising reproaches. Its only purpose is to repeat the moment of injury and thus secure the victim status of homosexual Germans.

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