

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is queerest of them all?" Citizenship and sexuality in times of de/normalisation¹

Ana Cristina Santos

Birkbeck Institute for Social Research, University of London, UK
Centro de Estudos Sociais da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal

c.santos@bbk.ac.uk

In 2010, Portugal became the eighth country worldwide to approve same-sex civil marriage. In the last ten years, LGBT activism has played a crucial role in influencing social, political and legal change, including the legal recognition of de facto unions (in 2001), the Constitutional ban of discrimination based on sexual orientation (2004), the equalisation of ages of consent (2007), protective legislation regarding hate crimes and domestic violence (2007) and pro-transgender policies (2011) (Santos, 2008).

The LGBT movement played a very significant role in the approval of same-sex marriage but, contrary to the previous examples, this achievement did not generate undisputed celebratory collective statements. Instead, the process that led to the inclusion of same-sex couples in the marriage act ignited some heated and passionate comments, generating tension amongst activists. Instead of hiding the tension, I want to address it precisely because I believe it poses a significant challenge – as well as a valuable opportunity – for the LGBT movement.

Therefore, this paper is about normativity and ambivalence.²

And let me start with heteronormativity, understood as the assumption that heterosexuality is *the* socially valued sexual orientation.³ Laws, social policy, school manuals,

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² This paper was partially inspired by the discussions about ambivalence and complexity of queer intimacies held in WP6 on Intimate Citizenship under the EU 6th framework research project FEMCIT – Gendered Citizenship and the Impact of the Women's Movement in Multicultural Europe. Another, more extensive and co-authored paper based on the biographic accounts of lesbian, gay and bisexual people across Europe is currently being prepared and it will be published in the near future. More information can be found at www.femcit.org (accessed 09/12/2010).

³ A more comprehensive definition of heteronormativity is offered by Berlant and Warner: "By heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged. Its coherence is always provisional, and its privilege can take several (sometimes contradictory) forms: unmarked, as the basic idiom of the personal and social; or marked as a natural state; or projected as an ideal or moral accomplishment. It consists less of norms that could be summarized as a body of doctrine than a sense of rightness produced in contradictory manifestations – often unconscious, immanent to practice or institutions. Contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality. One of the most conspicuous differences is that it has no parallel, unlike heterosexuality, which organizes homosexuality as its opposite. Because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has, it would not be possible to speak of "homonormativity" in the same sense" (Berlant and Warner, 2000).

advertising, etc. are often structured under that assumption, turning lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people virtually non-existent. As Michael Warner has phrased it, this assumption “produces a profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame” (2000: 8).

There is a variety of ways in which people challenge or question heteronormativity, but, just like other deeply entrenched prejudices, no one is utterly sheltered from it. And largely because we have been trained (raised, educated, used to, etc) to think according to binaries, the tradition to replicate norms that operate as excluding principles becomes naturalised and comfortable, especially so for those who manage to be included, however precariously. Such comfort leads to a rather selfish replication of the norm, in an attempt to secure the boundaries that protect the privileged.

Naturally, heteronormativity is not alone. So, perhaps it is useful to think collectively about other normativities, equally powerful in their exclusionary assignment.

In this regard, the recently acclaimed notion of homonormativity has been suggested to be linked to a “rise of a neoliberal politics of normalisation” (Richardson, 2005) and to contribute to creation and recognition of the “normal gay”, who, according to Steven Seidman, is “Expected to be gender conventional, link sex to love and a marriage-like relationship, defend family values, personify economic individualism, and display national pride” (2002: 133). Very different from what is the case with heteronormativity and heterosexuality, homonormativity does not assume people are generally gay or lesbian. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, explain “Because homosexuality can never have the invisible, tacit, society-founding rightness that heterosexuality has, it would not be possible to speak of ‘homonormativity’ in the same sense.” (Berlant and Warner, 2000).

According to much of the vast literature on homonormativity, assimilationism and normalisation, there is an insidious assumption according to which LGBT people should reject every feature of conventional partnering and parenting in order to avoid being read as ‘homonormal’ or, perhaps even worse, ‘normalised’ (Lewin, 1996; Warner, 2000; Seidman, 2002; Richardson, 2004 & 2005). Signs of this normalisation include being in a coupled relationship, monogamous, procreative and recognised under the law (i.e. in a civil partnership or legally married).⁴

Drawing on what has been said so far, one feels tempted to stop for a moment and assess the possibilities and constraints of both forms of (hetero and homo) normativity. If the goal is to be able to live our lives as “full intimate citizens” (Roseneil, 2010: 82), none of these categories, however different in its historical background and political purpose and impact,

⁴ Gayle Rubin, writing about a sex hierarchy, draws a distinction between *good, normal and natural sex*, on the one hand, and *bad, abnormal and unnatural sex*, on the other. While the former is described as heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, non-commercial, in pairs, in a relationship, same generational, in private, without pornography, using bodies exclusively and ‘vanilla sex’, the latter would be characterised by being homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, using pornography, involving objects and sadomasochism (1998: 109).

seem to do justice to the complex ways in which real lives happen (Davidmann, 2010a, 2010b; Weeks *et al*, 2001). Both categories are, indeed, presumptuously prescriptive and they both lack the flexibility required to provide relevant and plausible explanations.

It does not require extensive fieldwork or theoretical insight to realise that people's experiences in relation to their intimate and personal lives are not necessarily always based on strict ideological perspectives that artificially create insiders and outsiders (e.g. assimilationists versus radicals). The real density of people's "intimate counter-normativities" (Roseneil, 2009) does not accommodate abstract 'either /or', but rather embraces diversity, rebellion, contradiction and subversion. Arguably, by using a queer reading of normalisation, features such as these – rebellion, contradiction, subversion – can be read into what would otherwise be rapidly dismissed as a normative surrender of the 'normal gay'. Therefore, I want to explore if normalcy can ever be queered and, if so, what's queer about being normal, particularly in a context where being 'normal' is perhaps not as valued as being 'outstanding' (Martin, 1993).

Admittedly, even the most conventional relational arrangement such as civil marriage or civil partnership can be used in ways that destabilise conventional notions of family, intimacy and sex. Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically queer, or indeed normalised, in specific practices or identities. If so, what determines normalcy and queerness, and to what extent can these two notions coexist?

It is my argument that what determines what gets to be labelled as normalised or queer, good or bad, average or outstanding is a form of prescriptive normativity – an allegedly queer normativity – that exists through reinforcing intimate otherness. Intimate otherness is a process of estrangement through which allegedly queer normativity produces its others, thus asserting its own specific standards of what is acceptable, or not, regarding intimate and sexual relationships. Hence, married, monogamous, cohabiting and/or reproductive citizens become intimate others, politically separated from whom and what remains queerly unstained. In this sense, intimate others consist of a revisited form of sexual strangers, to use Shane Phelan's notion (2001), only one which is constructed from within the queer community rather than externally imposed.

The contradiction of this admittedly exaggerated (is it?) picture should be evident – if you, as me, understand queer as the negation of rigid and static categories and as a celebration of possibility and liberation, then prescriptive normativities that produce further exclusion based on intimate and sexual biographies should not be part of queer.

Moreover, may we remind ourselves, this is not a competition to see who or what gets the queer golden medal. This is about you and me and the people we love and how we want it, or not, publicly recognised. And most of the time, people are not bothered about categories and labels when they chose to be or to remain partnered, monogamous and reproductive, as Woody Allen as aptly noted in his recent movie *Whatever Works* (2010).

Needless to say, what applies to ‘people’ in general is also true for LGBT and queer activists, who, as situated political actors, are also situated lovers, partners and parents. Therefore, what is at stake here is the ability to have personal and intimate relationships, and to remain as queer as ever, regardless of marital status (almost a new criteria to be included under article 13 of the Portuguese Constitution). Additionally, it is not only the ability to remain as queer as ever, but also to be *recognised* as such. The mirror on the wall – whatever the external or interior wall on which it is hanging – should provide such recognition, regardless of the marital status.

This is, after all, what embracing intimate diversity should mean – “the freedom and ability to construct and live selfhood and a wide range of close relationships – sexual/love relationships, friendships, parental and kin relations – safely, securely and according to personal choice, in their dynamic and changing forms, with respect, recognition and support from state and civil society” (Roseneil, 2010: 82).

Concluding comments

Queer is often defined as anti-identity, presumed to push people away from any form of identification, even if politically strategic or willingly self-embraced. Perhaps more useful would be to think of queer as anti-normative, against external – or internal – prescriptions in relation to the self and personal relationships (Cascais, 2004; Santos, 2006; Oliveira *et al*, 2009).

People’s lives are nuanced. We do not live according to pre-maid theories, nor do we want to ascribe theory the power to constrain life and love in the ways law and policy have often done it in the past – and present. Dismissing couple-like, monogamous and/or reproductive relationships from the sphere of queer activism would be as harmful and despicable as excluding polyamorous activists from LGBT coalitions. The processes of symbolic othering and the impacts of symbolic violence enacted by both forms of exclusion are, in many regards, similar. Personally – and perhaps I am not alone in this – I would rather stay away from exclusion, because that is not how queer battles against prejudice are won. Besides, exclusion, however you try to justify it, stinks.

The space and place for inclusion and freedom lies within the multiple textures of our intimate and sexual biographies. “Intimate counter-normativities” (Roseneil, 2009) are informed by ambivalence. And ambivalence is indeed a crucial legacy of the queer thought that moved away from dyadic binaries and offered a world of exciting possibilities instead. It is not either/ or – it is both, and, yes, it is complicated, and fascinating, and so much more meaningful.

In this respect, it seems relevant to consider Audre Lorde’s short poem entitled “Who said it was simple”:

But I who am bound by my mirror
 as well as my bed
 see causes in Colour
 as well as sex

and sit here wondering
 which me will survive
 all these liberations
 Audre Lorde⁵

We – lesbians, gay men, transgender, bisexuals, straight-queers, etc. – are proudly contradictory and ambivalent. And it is time that this ambivalence is regarded as a resource, potentially enabling people to adjust, to learn, to experiment in their quest for a better life, if not a happy one.

In the current post civil marriage age, to grasp and embrace such ambivalence is certainly one of the biggest challenges – and opportunities – that queer politics face today.

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⁵ Poem "Who said it was simple". Quoted in Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories*, p. 144.

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