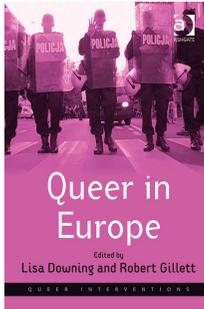


Recensies



Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett. *Queer in Europe: Contemporary case studies*. Part of the series *Queer interventions*, Michael O'Rourke. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011. 209 pages, €60,00, ISBN 9781409404644

Queer in Europe

As a part of the book series *Queer interventions*, the book *Queer in Europe: Contemporary case studies* is an edited volume that focuses on political and theoretical questions arising from the concept of 'queer' in different geographical contexts. The book is edited by Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett and elaborates on the multiple ways in which elements of queer are deployed in various European countries and regions by presenting different case studies. Tensions between identity politics on the one hand, where queer is referred to as a term of nonconforming sexual identity, and on the other hand theoretical approaches aiming to go beyond identity as fixed, are present within these considerations of the different uses of 'queer'.

The theoretical aim of the edited volume is twofold, described by the authors as both 'queering Europe' and 'Europeanizing Queer' (p. 9). This refers to the double movement of both destabilising the concept of Europe through a queer perspective, and at the same time to ground the concept of queer within this context, instead of approaching this as a force from outside. The development of queer theory within a European context is often traced back to US intervention, whereby Europe gets framed as 'catching up' with the American based original (p. 5). Contrary to such a linear account of 'queer in Europe', the authors aim to show its complexities by elaborating on the discontinuities, transformations and plurality of queer theory in various European contexts. Indeed, Downing

and Gillett criticise an easy conceptualisation of Europe as a homogenous fort influenced by forces from outside, and argue instead that the idea of the continent as unitary becomes untenable by showing the multiple and contradictory aspects of 'queer' within Europe. This notion of 'queer' is unstable in itself, something to which the localisation of the concept in the European contexts offers important new insights. In this way, both 'queer' and 'Europe' become fluid notions while at the same time specific and localised.

Through the putting together of these multiple geographical locations in European countries, materialised in the articles of the contributors, Downing and Gillett aim to look at seven intersections. Connecting this to broader considerations within queer theory and activism, they first ask how a queer subject or subject of queer can be conceptualised; what the limits are of queer as a counter-discursive strategy and how queer operates in different ways in the imagining of non-normative sexual subjects (p. 6). This is related to their second question, regarding the sufficiency of queer as a strategy to deal with *phobia, meaning homophobia as well as transphobia, including hate speech and violence. Other intersections focus on relations between queer and activism, nationalism, religion, capitalism and feminism. Each ten-page article focuses on a country within Europe, such as England, France, Poland and the Italy. Not all of the proposed seven themes are found in each of the contributions, and some themes are not as well articulated as others: whereas the relations between nationalism and queer theory/activism are amply dealt with, relations between queer and religion or queer and feminism are addressed in only a few of the articles. Interactions between social movements and state nationalisms influence the developments of 'queer' in academia in diverse and specific ways. For instance, Łukasz Szulc's article, *Queer in Poland: Under construction* shows how queer perspectives are used by individual academics, yet remain difficult to integrate in Polish politics. Because of structural homophobia and legal inequality of different sexual subjectivities, Polish LGBT organisations focus more on acceptance, identity building and assimilation than on the destabilising of these categories. It becomes similarly evident in the articles of Nayia Kamenou about Cyprus and Erzsébet Barát's article on Hungary how LGBT movements in these two contexts are built around identity politics, in which the Q of 'queer' is merely an add-on to LGBT, with the latter remaining the more frequently used concept within these social movements. Both Hungarian and Cypriot state nationalisms are structured around the ideal of the heterosexual family and normative religious, gender and sexual identities. Their policies render non-normative sexual subjectivities invisible and unthinkable in national discourse, thereby limiting access to symbolic citizenship to conforming subjects and excluding people who express or identify as 'queer'.

The article of Anne Mulhall, *Queer in Ireland: 'Deviant' filiation and the (un) holy family*, is one of the few that explicitly focuses on the relations between queer and racism, though this is not a theme pointed out by the editors in the introduction. Mulhall shows that Irish nationalism idealises the Irish national subject as white and heterosexual, and as focused on the protection of the family. This excludes both queer people and immigrants from full-fledged citizenship. Contrary to the developments in Ireland, Gert Hekma demonstrates how in the Netherlands, homosexual identity becomes embedded within Dutch nationalism, which celebrates the supposed gay tolerance as a characteristic of Dutch national subjectivity. Represented as opposed to, and more progressive than religious arguments, the secularised ideal of Dutch citizenship excludes people that do not, or cannot conform to these homonationalist ideals. Bart Eeckhout describes similar processes in the case of Belgium in his article *Queer in Belgium: Ignorance, goodwill, compromise*. Both Eeckhout and Hekma describe the process of normalisation of sexuality in citizenship. Although LGBT movements started out as radical in Belgium and the Netherlands, these are increasingly institutionalised and desexualised in public nationalist discourse. This process resulted in a rhetorical acceptance of LGBTs, which remained conditional and reinstated heterosexuality as the norm. In these contexts, queer emerged from a critique of normalising processes, mostly taking place in a political realm. These liberationist politics that are critiqued in the Netherlands and Belgium, are questioned in Germany as well. The article of Ute Kalender situates the German developments in the uses of queer in an anti-capitalist critique, specific to the country, yet connected to broader processes of capitalism and global market consumerism. In this way, 'queer' can take many forms, influenced by multiple different sites, processes and linkages.

The complexities involved in finding a balance between queer as 'beyond identity' and the importance of strategic identity based politics is apparent throughout all articles. This brings me to the first point of critique. Most of the contributors trace queer theory back to Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Eve Sedgwick. In his article *Queer in France: AIDS dissidentification in France*, James N. Nagar points to the different processes of knowledge production and histories of a specific body of thought as located in France. Although Foucault is positioned as a continental philosopher in France, Nagar argues that through American appropriations of his work, for example in queer theory and its subsequent moving back to the continent, Foucault's work has moved in many different ways in Europe. Nagar hints to the importance of reflecting on theoretical locations by showing the developments within French queer theory, both geographically but as well in different disciplines.

Paradoxically however, *Queer in Europe* presents a rather singular story of queer by taking on a theoretical genealogy of Foucault, Butler and Sedgwick, thereby excluding amongst others a critique coming from a queer of colour body of scholarship. As such the queer subject, although fragmented and multiple, remains implicitly a white, modern and secular subject, which is questioned by none of the contributors. Although both Mulhall and Hekma, on respectively Ireland and the Netherlands, as well as Barát and Kamenou in Hungary and Cyprus focus on the role of religious institutions in public discourse and LGBT and queer politics, a critical approach to the modern liberal ideal of secularism remains absent and 'religion' comes to stand for oppressive structures that limit the possibility of queer expression. Throughout the book *Queer in Europe*, queer becomes a mode of critical intervention in some contexts, yet is equated with LGBT in others, both in the editors' introduction as well as in the essays, in which the editors do not elaborate on their perspective on 'queer'. Even though the book urges for an increased multiple understanding of processes of queer, and as such destabilises the concept of Europe as homogenous, it remains unclear what 'queering Europe' would imply in politics, as well as who is doing the 'queering', for what reasons, and what the different stakes are in this process.

A second point of contention concerns the notion of queer as a process of progress. The editors aim to move beyond a perspective of linear progress and to criticise the idea of movement from the US to Europe. Paradoxically, the articles seem to reflect such a narrative of progress through idealising 'queer' as a process that attempts to move 'beyond' fixed and normalised LGBT politics is idealised. Some countries, such as Hungary, Poland and Cyprus are represented as 'not yet there', as exemplified by Szulc's chapter title, which reads 'Queer in Poland: Under construction'. Although ideals of sexual freedom in the Netherlands and Germany are questioned, the development to legal equality is celebrated. In places where laws regulating homophobia and sexual citizenship and excluding non-heterosexualities are intact, identity based LGBT politics are presented as strategic and necessary and as not yet able to move to a queer approach. This reinstates 'queer' as a more developed way of approaching sexuality.

The implicit approach to queer as ideal, even when seen as contradictory and fluid is problematic since this has the risk of obscuring other intersections and exclusions within these particular contexts. Consequently, notions of racism, ethnic discrimination and gender difference are not a central element in this book, and absent from the seven themes mentioned in the introduction. This is remarkable, since the establishment of Europe as a political union is embedded in (post-)colonialism and regulation of race and ethnicity. Ulrika Dahl shows the importance of the history of internal imperialism in Scandinavia, or 'the Northern

Territories', and Szulc points to the role of communism in the development of LGBT movements in Poland. Nevertheless, internal imperialism and relations are for the most part absent or referred to as merely a historical context fixed in the past. By focusing only on the international interactions between Europe and the US, contemporary relations within the geographical continent, and with and among colonised territories are not taken into account. A more in-depth reflection on Europe as a continent, with its internal tensions and contradictions and with a legacy of imperialism and colonialism, as well on Europe as a concept that speaks of practices of inclusion and exclusion would have benefited the argument.

The aims of the editors Downing and Gillett are well argued and relevant in the context of queer theory and politics in Europe, and these arguments should be carried on in further work. Through the choice of different case studies it becomes apparent that neither queer, nor Europe can be regarded as self-evident or homogenous notions. Altogether, *Queer in Europe* provides an introduction to the project of 'Europeanizing Queer' and 'Queering Europe' by showing the multiple ways that 'queer' has a place in particular locations in Europe, a project that is necessary both in constructing a perspective of Europe as non-unitary, as well as to contextualise the different movements of 'queer' theory and politics. However, scholars familiar with key concepts in queer theory might not find theoretical depth to elaborate on the complexities that queer in/and Europe entails. Because of the relative shortness of the individual essays, the reader is presented with thirteen introductions on the role of 'queer' in different countries as distinct developments, stories that are not put into conversation with each other. To continue this project, future works could take to expand on the gaps of this volume by elaborating on internal tensions and relations, pointing to the necessity of approaching the aims of 'Europeanizing Queer' and 'Queering Europe' as ongoing, queer processes.

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