

Queers in Europe

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Abstract

Since the sixteenth century, the word queer has meant “perverse” in English. The term spread in the United States in the late twentieth century to criticize and render obsolete both gender (man/woman) and sexual (homosexuality/heterosexuality) binarism through an analysis of their diversity. Its emergence on the European continent dates back to the 1990s, expressing itself within academia (through diverse publications of queer theory) and through the emergence of social movements distinguishing themselves from the traditional lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movement. Queers in Europe created numerous national organizations reflecting the context of each country, notably in their relations with the LGBT movement, in addition to a perceptible transnational dynamic with respect to theoretical explorations and common European demonstrations.

Article

In the late sixteenth century, the term queer meant “slanted” and “perverse” in English. Its use spread in the early twentieth century to more specifically designate homosexuals, particularly men seeking sexual relations with other men without necessarily expressing a feeling of shame. During the second half of the century, queer as an adjective and common noun took on a critical dimension, seeking to make both gender (man/woman) and sexual (homosexuality/heterosexuality) binarism obsolete and pointless through an analysis of their diversity. This process took place through a dual activist (*Queer Nation*) and academic (queer theory) re-appropriation. It was based on early works analysing the construction of the subject as a product of power, such as those by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Michel Foucault (1926-1984), and Monique Wittig (1935-2003). The work of Foucault—and of other scholars and feminists that came to be known as *French Theory*—inspired queer thought in the US, which in turn influenced European researchers such as Didier Éribon (born in 1953) and Sam/Marie-Hélène Bourcier (born in 1963) in France, who served as relays for this new field of thought in the 1990s. Queer emerged in a dialectical relation between theoretical publications in academia and the birth of movements distinct from the traditional LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) movement. This relation was simultaneously national and transnational. Scandinavian countries were influenced by the queer genealogy of the US very early on. The journal *Lambda Nordica* was the first to introduce queer in its special report on “Queer Theory: What Is It and What Is It Good For?” (1996), edited by the Swedish anthropologist Don Kulick (born in 1960), who himself

often travelled between New York and Stockholm. In Germany, queer emerged from an intellectual and political overlap inspired by the traditions of materialist feminism and transatlantic exchange. In Italy the queer debate was marked by a tradition of “native” anti-normative criticism, initiated by the *Fuori!* movement and its emblematic figure, Mario Mieli (1952-1983). His book *Elements of a Gay Critique* (1977), translated into French by Massimo Prearo (born in 1977) in 2008, is considered a precursor of queer theory. At the same time, the research of Teresa de Lauretis (born in 1938), a US professor of Italian origin, also had its own influence on the introduction of queer thought within the Italian setting. Queer was thus diffused in all European countries and became integrated within specific academic and activist national experiences.

These features specific to each state were characterized by a shared intersectional exploration of sexuality and postcolonialism, notably with regard to migration and geopolitics in Europe. The *Queer in Europe* (Exeter, 2008), *Sexual Nationalisms in the New Europe* (Amsterdam, 2011), and *European Geographies of Sexualities* (Brussels 2011, Lisbon 2013, Rome 2015) conferences were emblematic of a new shared problematic connected to sexuality, neoliberalism, and nationalism in Europe. The publication of collective edited volumes and monographs reinforced the European approach toward the queer question: *Queer in Europe* (2011); *De-centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (2011); *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011). During the same period, a generation of activists identifying as queer echoed the previously mentioned theories and opposed the rigid identities of LGBT and women’s movements. Specific activist practices emerged both locally and nationally. For instance, on the local level, queer collectives became active notably in anarchist and squatter circles, proposing non-hierarchical forms of organization, such as the *Mov Kafenio* and *Massqueeraid* movements in Thessaloniki, Greece during the 2010s. These activists offered alternatives to the English term queer, which was “translated” into their own languages (French: *transpédégouine*; Italian: *frocia*; Spanish: *transmaricabollo*, etc.). Activists, such as those from *QueerLab* and *Laboratorio Smaschieramenti* in Italy, positioned themselves against binary homo/hetero identities, and questioned the LGBT movement’s calls for equal rights, criticizing it for naturalizing homosexuals into a minority group and leaving the inegalitarian and heteronormative order of society unchallenged. This position has often been accompanied by an emphasis on the different subcultural and transgressive styles of self-representation, such as the post-porn performances of the Zarra Bonheur collective (founded in 2014). At the national level, collectives such as the *Panthères roses* [Pink Panthers] (2002) in Paris, *Queericulum Vitae* (2004) in Athens, and *QueerLab* (2011) in Rome all fought against homophobia and sexism in both the heteronormative public sphere and circles on the left. In countries where LGBT rights are not—or are little—recognized, such as those in Eastern and Central Europe, queer activists have not necessarily radically broken away from the LGBT movement. Finally, in Northern Europe, queer movements disapprove of both the institutionalization of LGBT movements as well as state policies that inscribe sexual liberty and gender equality in the national narrative. Queer activists often

refer to this co-optation as “homonationalism,” which is to say a policy seeking to stigmatize other minority populations, notably migrants and/or Muslims.

The transnationalism of queer activism has been characterized by collective activities, similar to the dynamic sparked by alter-globalization movements in the early 2000s. For example, collectives identifying as queer participated in demonstrations in Genoa in 2001, as well as in European social forums or in the anti-border networks of *No Borders* (1999). Transnational queer activism in Europe has simultaneously pursued a process of empowerment with respect to other movements on the left, with the annual Queeruption festival representing an emblematic moment: London (1998, 2002), Berlin (2003), Amsterdam (2004), Barcelona (2005), Manchester (2010). Queeruption, which was organized along anti-hierarchical lines and took inspiration from cultures of sharing and the deconstruction of the production/consumption system, aligns with do-it-yourself (DIY), punk, and squatter subcultures. Other queer festivals have meanwhile attracted a transnational public—the queer festival of Copenhagen (2009-2016), the Oslo festival (2010-2013), Queeristan in Amsterdam (2009-2017). These festivals have contributed to the construction of a collective transnational queer identity, based on the refusal of rigid gender and sexual identities as well as the establishment of borders within “fortress Europe.” Transnational queer activism has thus expanded its repertoire of actions and demands by including contemporary political challenges such as the “refugee crisis.” A number of initiatives underscore this concern for convergence, such as the implementation of measures to support non-heterosexual and transgender refugees on the part of groups such as QueerMigs (Zurich, 2013), Queer refugees Support (Hamburg, 2017), and Lgbtqi+ refugees (Athens 2017).

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