

Editorial #6

Queerly Social

"Queer" and "sociality" are no easy allies. Historically, dominant forms of sociality developed mostly along the lines of sexual, gender and identitarian normativities that either erased queerness from the "proper" sphere of social relations, or coded it in ways presumed non-threatening to an existing "social order." On the other hand, sociality is precisely where queerness happens, where it develops its own modes of living, its own codes and intelligibilities. Always already "here," queerness has had to negotiate its terms with dominant social arrangements and/or create alternative spaces, relations and networks. This thematic issue of *InterAlia* was conceived as a reflection not simply on the (non)presence of queer subjects in society and its institutions or their (non)visibility in the public sphere, but also on the ways any given sociality organizes itself, inevitably, in relation to queerness, even if that relation is one of denial or disavowal.

Theorizations of the uneasy relationship(s) between queerness and sociality translate more or less directly into activist, political and

cultural strategies, but also into individual life ethics and lifestyles of choice. The reverse movement is equally valid, though: individual life ethics and changing group dynamics - never separable from specific socio-material positionings and the larger politico-economic forces shaping the present "world-system" - call for certain theorizations or countertheorizations of the social. In short, theories are strategies, too. Since its very beginnings, queer theory has been particularly attentive to (and very often critical of) particular modes of exclusion and inclusion, modes of (dis)institutionalization and (un)belonging. Jasbir Puar's recent work, for instance, asks pertinent and timely questions on the ways queerness is being co-opted into certain versions of (highly racialized) socialities that help justify the biopolitical regulation of populations and the imperial policies of the hegemonic "West." In other words, the choice of particular goals as strategic for local LGBTI(Q) movements is never "innocent" in global terms, and its consequences go far beyond particular "gains" (or losses) for a nation's LGBTI(Q) constituency.

Inevitably, questions of "queer sociality" - as it has been or as it should be - reopen the old rift between the assimilationist strategies of mainstream LGBTI activism and the more oppositional strategies pursued by queer activism. The so-called "anti-social turn" in queer theory may be interpreted as an attempt to mark a radical difference

between the positivism of mainstream LGBTI thinking (trying to buy into society's axiologies of a "better future") and a queer stance which, in Lee Edelman's account, should be grounded in a firm gesture of negation. The topical question of same-sex marriages / civil unions is a specific case in point. While it would be an overgeneralization to simply align queer strategies with an anti-marriage stance and the mainstream LG(BTI?) policies with a pro-marriage one, it is certainly the case that most critiques of the pursuit of same-sex marriage recognition have come from self-defined queer positions. To be sure, many LGBTI/Q-identified activists and academics, irrespective of their otherwise different political and theoretical backgrounds, have mobilized around the civil unions / marriage issue, believing it is "history's call," a time to rally wide support and gather momentum for what they consider a significant and desired social change. The voices of those who consider this strategy myopic and possibly detrimental to the "queer cause" are often silenced in the clamour of the political rally; indeed, opposition to the "legalization" project is often cast in terms of irresponsible and/or ill-willed depoliticization of queerness. From an analytical point of view, however, it seems crucial to keep asking questions about the untold genealogies of the LGBTI/Q movements' projected goals and the possible unanticipated consequences their implementation may bring. The questions include, for example, in what ways can "the gay marriage project" be

(mis)used to strengthen the regulation of populations; to facilitate the market's targeting strategies; to stabilize the social relations imposed by the neoliberal regime; to enhance the "quality of life" of the chosen few (or many) at the expense of the increased (albeit concealed) devaluation and suffering of others? Or would the recognition of same-sex couples implicit in the institutionalization of gay marriage or civil unions result in the trickling down of some symbolic or social advantage to other queers? To put it simply, the larger picture must never be overlooked.

As may have become obvious from the above reflections, two particular contexts determined the editorial decision to have a queer / sociality issue. One was the polemical controversy surrounding the so-called anti-social turn in queer theory, exemplified foremostly by Lee Edelman's *No Future* (2004). The polemic has had political and methodological dimensions, the former evident especially in defenses of utopian thinking (as Jose Esteban Munoz's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) and the latter based in resistance to the particular take on the psychoanalytic category the death drive adopted by Edelman; one such area of resistance has been work on affect theory, which represents a deflection (rather than disavowal) of psychoanalysis. The second context is more local: it has to do with the recent campaigns in Poland for the implementation of laws mandating civil unions between same-sex

couples or between same-sex and differently gendered couples alike. We assumed there was a need for a more in-depth debate about the queer-political stakes involved in the possibility of such legislation.

The former context is reflected in the four English-language essays included in the current issue albeit most writers do not engage Edelman's thesis directly; perhaps the moment for this has passed. Still, by proposing a Deleuzian paradigm as a direct alternative to Edelman's death drive in "To Come: Queer Desire and Social Flesh," Tomasz Sikora expresses a preference for thinking invested in unforeseen possibilities rather than foreclosed in purely negative terms. Following the work of Deleuze and Guattari, Sikora proposes a redefinition of the social through the concept of (queer) desire and its anti-identitarian creativity. A similar celebration of the productive work of desire is found in Dervla Shannahan's "Queer Futurities, queerer bodies & Winterson's *The Stone Gods* ." Shannahan argues that, in her own words, "Winterson's text ultimately answers many of the questions" posed by the anti-social turn. The other two essays in English address queer sociality in ways that are further removed from the particular question posed by the anti-social turn, although both are about figures of negativity. In "The Chasm & the Abyss: Queer Theory and the Socialities of Queer Youth Suicide" Rob Cover argues that dominant discourses on

sexuality - however "gay-friendly," supportive and based on the idea of tolerance - may prove insufficient in creating a social environment conducive to a "livable" queer life. In a way perhaps unintended by the author (and unintended by the editors), the essay is a sort of counterpoint to the sometimes celebratory presentations of death drive as the ethical principle alone worthy of queers. Ryan Richard Thoreson's "The Queer Paradox of LGBTI Human Rights" addresses a perennial contradiction at the heart of the LGBTI/queer project: in so far as it is focused on expanding freedom by demanding rights, the project is torn apart from within by being based in a sense of identity (defined by non-normative sexuality and its public censure) and simultaneous resistance to identities (defined as lesbian, gay male etc.), which are seen as already invested in normative thinking. Yet, the freedom guaranteed by human rights laws is rooted in identity categories, even if they are rather broadly defined. Thoreson's response is to insist on the importance of local contexts to understanding the ways in which rights struggles may be anti-normative in some places even when they would be normative elsewhere: "The debate about whether human rights curtail or promote queerness presumes a stable queerness which does not exist."

The Polish-language contributions consist of an article on representations of queers in the media and an annotated translation

of a historic manifesto titled "Queers Read This." Paweł Rams's "Queerowanie mediów" (Queering the media) is a discussion of the evolving representations of queerness in the popular media. His main point of reference is the connection between aesthetics and politics as drawn by Jacques Ranciere. Rams contends that the substantial growth in visibility of LGBTI thematic on television and in other media represents a re-configuration of the "distribution of the sensible" (*partage du sensible*), a crucial point because for Ranciere the main issue in politics is to have one's voice recognized as capable of making specific demands. Rams's thesis confirms that recognition may be a necessary precondition for redistribution - arguably, this is another paradox of LGBTI rights as seen from a queer perspective. Piotr Nazaruk performs an invaluable service with his translation and useful annotations of the 1990 manifesto "Queers Read This," which marks the launch of "queer" as a defiant political slogan embodied by the movement known as Queer Nation. Revisiting this powerful text, hitherto unavailable in Polish translation, makes the distinction between a queer position and a more mainstream LGBTI identity-based position more intimately felt than most theoretical discussions can ever make it felt.

The immediate local context for the idea behind the present issue, which is the current campaign for civil unions in Poland, remains unaddressed by contributors. We will therefore offer the briefest

possible summary of the current situation and some of the debate that it has spurred. The campaign for civil unions has been gathering momentum since 2010 and has recently begun to receive attention in the mainstream media. A bill to this effect has been put to the table by the Social Democrat Alliance (SLD, aka the former Communist party) but it is unlikely that the parliament will officially consider it, and much less vote on it, before its current term is up in the fall of 2011. However, the Polish prime minister Donald Tusk of the centrist Civic Platform (PO) announced his intention of making social issues the center of his party's platform in the upcoming parliamentary elections, and said that he expects civil partnership to be voted into law by the next parliament, assuming that his party continues to govern, as many expect will be the case. While promises of this kind have been made, and broken, by Polish political leaders before, it seems that the public debate about the need for civil unions and growing popular support for such regulations make some legal implementation more likely than ever before. There is also a public campaign, organized by a grass-roots LGBTI rights group, which demands civil partnerships and which makes this point by putting images of same-sex couples with appropriate text on posters and billboards in medium-sized towns across Poland; the idea is to take the campaign beyond the largest cities, which are more liberal than many smaller towns. (In the spirit of queer solidarity, this campaign has been actively supported by Poland's nascent transgender and

intersexual movement, which demands changes in the law to make transitioning a less formidable legal challenge.) Another group of LGBTI activists has held meetings with the LGBTI communities across Poland over the past year or so in order to popularize and debate the idea of civil unions.

In order to explicate this local context further, it is important to note that the Polish constitution defines marriage as union between man and woman, a phrasing that most constitutional lawyers believe makes it very difficult to attempt implementing same-sex marriage anytime soon. The option of supporting civil unions in some form is thus seen as a second-best choice, or as the pragmatic alternative to demanding same-sex marriage. Activists arguing for it have of course come under some fire both from the conservatives, who are often aligned with the Catholic Church, a powerful socio-political entity in Poland, and who see civil unions as a threat to the current symbolic hegemony of marriage, and from those members of the LGBTI community who believe that only marriage can bring full symbolic recognition to same-sex couples. This latter position, which presents itself as the more radical demand, is in another sense also the more conservative, in that it prefers marriage to the less traditional solution of civil unions, and thus implicitly confirms marriage's symbolic importance. Those who prefer civil unions sometimes suggest that the ideal law should be similar to the French

PACS (*pacte du solidarite sociale*) in that it should leave quite a lot of freedom to the individuals coming together about how precisely to define the relationship. There is almost universal agreement among civil unions supporters that these should be made available to both same-sex and differently gendered couples, despite some concern that implementing civil unions for straight couples could be ruled unconstitutional (this concern reflects the past course of events in Hungary, as well as similar concerns in Germany, which has same-sex unions only). On the other hand, as more and more straight couples in Poland choose not to tie the marital knot, the option of civil partnerships may prove attractive and practical to them, boosting popular support for the bill. The envisioned regulations do not allow for the adoption of children by same-sex couples because gay adoption is opposed by the vast majority of Poles. However, activists have gone on record saying that they regard this limitation as temporary. According to some estimates, there may be tens of thousands of children being raised by same-sex couples in Poland: these children are usually either the biological offspring of one of the lesbian partners, or have been adopted by a single parent. Their legal situation is precarious: in case the biological or adoptive parent dies or is incapable of providing care, the child has no legal recourse to fight for the right to stay with the parent's partner, even if they form a family in fact. This problem is recognized to some extent but has not motivated legislative change.

There are some voices of dissent from the queer left when it comes to civil unions but they are not especially loud. Some activists have pointed out that people whose attachments are polyamoric rather than monogamous will not find the proposed law helpful in their lives. This is undoubtedly true, but the argument does not seem to prevent others from actively rallying for civil unions of two people. The class-based argument that civil unions (much like marriage) are essentially a discriminatory institution that will promote the interests of those officially coupled over those who are not, and that these privileges are likely to be far greater for those who are better off economically - prospective privileges include tax breaks for couples, which can be especially significant when it comes to inheriting property - is almost never brought up. Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* (1999) and Lisa Duggan's writings on homonormativity have been read and are occasionally called upon, but they seem to have little purchase with local activists. Of course, one problem with Warner's argument is that he does not propose to do away with heterosexual marriage while he does explicitly criticize same-sex marriage. This halfway position seems to perpetuate injustice in a way that is less radical than Warner's argument otherwise suggests. Of course, for any socio-political movement today to seriously propose an end to marriage between man and woman seems an impossibly tall order. After all, how would one go about achieving this goal? One could, nevertheless, imagine

gradual unbundling of some material privileges that often come with marriage - such as tax privileges - from the symbolic value of recognition which marriage also brings. In fact, some countries, notably Holland, seem to have undertaken such unbundling.

We hope that this brief discussion of the civil unions helps clarify the present-day situation in Poland. We believe that the five articles in this volume are not only interesting contributions to the continuing discussion of queer and sociality, but that they in fact offer testimony to the state of this discussion today, as it is shifting from a more strictly theoretical discourse to specific applications in the realms of cultural production, rights, and activism. Piotr Nazaruk's translation of "Queers Read This" with annotations explaining this important manifesto's historical context contributes to the debate by altering - as we believe it will - the local discursive context in Poland.

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