

THE PERSONAL IS NATIONAL

Queering the nation in Denmark and Ireland

By:

Liam Barrowcliffe

Centre for Advanced Migration Studies



ABSTRACT: This article analyses how those who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in Denmark and the Republic of Ireland see themselves in relation to hegemonic narratives of the nation. A range of personal narratives from the two national contexts were collected and analysed as narrative texts for the ways they represented positionality, agency and belonging in the wider discourse of the nation. LGB lives are often reduced to legislative turning points in national narratives, but this study shifts the focus onto the myriad of other formative experiences that contribute to their national sense of self. While a significant body of work has focused on the intersection of LGB(TQ) and national identity as harmful, leading to theories such as homonationalism, this article sees the relationship as more nuanced, and capable of going beyond acceptance/rejection or inclusion/exclusion dichotomies.

KEY WORDS: LGBTQ, national identity, homonationalism, narrative, queer



Introduction

The idea that nation-states are in part sustained by the stories they tell about themselves is by no means new. In light of these national narratives, it is important to consider the ways in which sexual minorities react to, experience, and form (or don't form) attachments to the nation. Probing the exact nature of the tension between nationally promoted versions of national identity and individuals' experience of it is the central driver of this article. Using the case of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people from Denmark and the Republic of Ireland,¹ this article argues for a more nuanced view of the intersection between sexual and national identity, whereby it is not reduced to either harmful co-option or rejection.

Based on ten qualitative interviews with Irish and Danish LGBs, the potential for articulating an alternative (queer) national sense of self with draws on, subverts, and ultimately transforms hegemonic² narratives around sexuality will be highlighted. Adhering to the principle that perspective and sense of self are best revealed by the spontaneous language used in the narration of events (Bauer & Jovchelovitch 2020: 4), interviews were relatively unstructured. While participants were oriented towards the topic with a warmup exercise, pre-planned questioning was restricted to asking for life stories as either an Irish or Danish LGB. Follow-up questions were related only to events already described, and generally involved invitations for further description.³

The idea that hegemonic national narratives would be entirely relatable to individual experience is evidently presumptuous. As Homi Bhabha points out, there is 'a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write it and the lives of those who live it' (Bhabha 2006: 1). However, this contrast between mundane experiences of the nation and official narratives does not mean that the former should be ignored. Instead, the nation's pervasiveness in many people's everyday experience means that the banal cannot be divorced from discussions of national identity. Michael Billig has emphasised that the 'world of nations is the everyday world', citing 'a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices' that must be reproduced 'in a banally mundane way'

¹ This is not meant as exclusionary to those with other non-heterosexual and/or cisgendered identities, but was a methodological choice based on access to participants and retaining a narrow focus on narratives of homosexuality/same-sex attraction. I use the more extensive acronym 'LGBTQ+' on occasions when it is relevant to wider political discourses.

² By 'hegemonic' I refer simply to the idea that these narratives are considered strong, powerful and widespread in discussions of Denmark and Ireland, rather than specifically to Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony.

³ For more information on this interview technique, see Tom Wengraf, "Preparing Lightly-Structured Depth Interviews: A Design for a BNIM-Type Biographic-Narrative Interview" (2011).

(Billig 1995: 11). My research draws on Billig's banal nationalism theory and centres these everyday practices/experiences of the nation, recasting them as national narratives in their own right, that are equally worthy of analysis.

For LGBs, this reading is particularly significant given that these everyday national experiences or attachments have often been ignored. Histories of oppression have sometimes been assumed to lead to exclusion and an outsider status, so that national and sexual identities are seen as irreconcilable. Alternatively, others have examined the intersection, but from the perspective of the theory of homonationalism, according to which queer identification with the nation is heavily linked to racism and exclusion of outsiders, who are deemed threats to the existence of LGBTQ+ people in Europe.⁴ Without undermining the fact that homonationalism is clearly an issue in some contexts, it should be possible to describe and analyse national feelings or attachments in a way that goes beyond this theory. One scholar who has managed a more nuanced approach is Lukasz Szulc, whose study of queer national identity in the Polish and Turkish contexts contains the assertion: "it is possible for queers to adopt national discourses without inescapably falling into homonationalism" (Szulc 2016: 308). By extending the discussion to different national contexts, this article aims to both continue and develop Szulc's proposition.

Both the similarities and the contrasts between Denmark and Ireland make them particularly interesting cases to research. While demographically alike in some senses, as two Western European countries with similar population sizes, their stories in relation to same-sex attraction in the 20th and 21st centuries are markedly different. In the case of Denmark, two closely connected narratives can be drawn out from its recent history in relation to same-sex attraction. The first of these is the idea that Danish national identity is inextricably bound up with the concept of *frisind*, which can be roughly translated as 'liberal-mindedness' or 'enlightened tolerance in matters of personal belief and moral conduct' (Bech 1992: 146). Without getting into a discussion of whether Danes actually hold such attitudes, it is clear that there is a perception, particularly amongst legislators, that *frisind* has become central to what it means to be Danish. The second of these narratives is the nation as a global frontrunner when it comes to progressive social policy, so that while not perfect, Denmark represents a comparatively 'good' place to live as someone with same-sex attraction. Denmark's status as the first country in the world to introduce same-sex partnership legislation in 1989 is a central driver of both these narratives.

⁴ See Jasbir Puar (2007), *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.

In contrast to these narratives' emphasis on stability, the relationship between Irish nationhood and same-sex attraction has been much more tumultuous during the second half of the 20th century and the opening of the 21st. Largely due to the influence of the Catholic Church's dominance over social life, Irishness and same-sex attraction can be read as historically oppositional concepts, a situation reflected in both legislation and accounts of popular culture during Ireland for most of the second half of the 20th century. The swift transformation from decriminalisation in 1993 to marriage equality in 2015 however has led to a strong narrative of the 'new Ireland'. This new Irishness is characterised by openness and liberalism, and the referendum that led to the 2015 marriage legislation is seen as its zenith. Consequently, a hegemonic narrative has emerged that Ireland is now a 'good' place to be LGB, but it used to be 'bad'.

With Bhabha's 'ambivalence' in mind, it seems clear that participants' lived experiences of the nation were not as simple as these narratives suggest. While not irrelevant, their dependence on legislation inevitably makes these narratives difficult to reconcile with the lived experience of being Irish/Danish and LGB. Following careful narrative analysis of these experiences, this article begins to chart a way out of a discussion dominated by success/failure as demonstrated by legislation.

National Subjectivities and 'Floating Insiders'

LGBs have often been subjected to automatic assumptions of exclusion, whereby they are passive outsiders only ever affected by, or represented by, discourses of the nation.⁵ However, participants across both Irish and Danish contexts adopted subjectivities that implied belonging in the nation, or at the very least involvement, contesting straightforward included/excluded or insider/outsider binaries. A subtle linguistic feature that made this subjectivity apparent was participants' use of the national 'we'. Callum, a 26-year-old who identifies as gay or queer and grew up in Cork, and Pernille, another 26-year-old who has identified variously as lesbian, bisexual or queer and grew up in Kolding, both provided examples:

I feel like we've put in a good energy, you know like the craic⁶ and... we're fun to have at a party (Callum)
I guess that is also why we get so drunk (Pernille)

⁵ As an example, see Sally Munt's discussion of homosexuality as antithetical to the nation and Irish LGBT's exclusion from St Patrick's Day Parade in New York in Munt, *Queer Attachments...* 2017: 56-7.

⁶ Irish slang, roughly translatable as 'fun' or 'good times'.

The ease with which both participants employ the “we”, automatically understood to mean them and other Irish or Danish people, reflects an assumed and naturalised membership of the national community. Pernille’s comment, referring to a perceived reticence to talk about sex in Denmark, is notable for the casual manner in which she evokes a shared national characteristic. The fact that the comment was preceded by a longer passage where Pernille details her personal experiences, before linking these to a conclusion about Danish traits in general, is also significant. It is simply taken as a given that the transition from “I” to “we” will be understood by both parties as the Danes in general.

One result of such casual self-inclusion into the national community, is the ability to confidently engage in what specifically constitutes the nation. Distinguishing national “things” was therefore a common feature of participants’ narratives. Cara, a 47-year-old who identifies as lesbian, a gay woman or LGBT and lives near Dublin, and Oliver, a 27-year-old who identifies as gay or queer and lives in Copenhagen, both offer prime examples:

It’s just you know one of those funny Irish things (Cara)

And I think that’s also a very Danish thing, like Forenings-Danmark, like all the clubs (Oliver)

“Awkwardness” or “close communities” were also examples of these “things” in the Irish context, while another Danish participant mentioned that eating pork was not a “Danish thing”. Rather than explicitly political or aggressive assertions of national identity, there is simply a comfort with using the nation as a frame of reference and descriptive tool. The off-hand, almost amiable nature of this familiarity defies simple exclusion from, or blind support of the nation.

Rather than uncritical spokespeople *of* the nation, I see these expressions of national attachments as representative of being assertive enough to be in conversation *with* the nation. To capture the flexibility and agency of such a subjectivity, I have coined the term ‘floating insider’. Self-inclusion into the national community and comfortable identification with certain aspects of it provide insider status, but this is accompanied by an agency to negotiate, be self-reflexive, and critique one’s own position in relation to hegemonic narratives on sexuality.

The ways in which a ‘floating insider’ positionality was expressed were particularly illuminating for what they revealed about the specificities of the Danish and Irish contexts. For the Irish LGBs in this research, language centred around the idea of a collective journey or transformation was common. All participants

at some point or another used language that situated themselves as part of an Irish people somewhere along the 'way'. Consistent use of the national 'we', combined with language of paths and directions, evoked membership of a cohesive unit moving forward, as though speaking themselves into a fused narrative of Irishness and homosexuality. However, to interpret these statements as simply reproducing the dominant narrative of a straightforward liberal transformation and post-2015 harmony would be misguided. For example, Oonagh, a 27-year-old who identifies as lesbian and lives in Limerick stated that "we're on the right path, but we've a long, long way to go still". The key to Oonagh's words lies in their simplicity. The national story of a rapid improvement in the conditions for LGBs is relatable and relevant for the individual, but the direct note of caution reminds us that individual feeling is generally messier than the straightforward celebration implied by the 'new Ireland' narrative.

For the Danish LGBs in this research, a similar, although differently expressed, phenomenon can be observed. While they did not tend to evoke such collective images, one can see how their expressions of national identity both related to hegemonic narratives of Danish *frisind* and Denmark as a frontrunner, while simultaneously critiquing and externalising from them to a degree.

A repeated pattern of speech involved some kind of pleasurable identification with Danishness and positioning alongside other Danes, immediately followed by a distancing from this statement. Victor, a 43-year-old gay man from Herning, for example declared himself proud of being Danish in a country where "we generally treat people good", before qualifying this with a recognition of "privilege blindness" and that "some are more equal than others." Peter, a 50-year-old gay man from Randers, also expressed pride at the fact that "we do have quite a big voice" for "such a small country" and that this was "really fantastic" because "we go out and we have the connections so our voice is recognised I would say", before retracting this somewhat by stating that he is just proud if something is a good idea, "wherever it comes from." Of note is not so much the content of these statements, in terms of whether they are 'true' or not in their assessment of equality in Denmark or the country's voice on the world stage, but how they continue to exemplify the idea of a 'floating' subjectivity. Naturalised self-inclusion into the national community does not equate to simplistic endorsement of a nation's narratives. In other words, we can identify a working within the boundaries of Danish subjectivity, as opposed to complete dissociation, but also a flexibility to probe its own dominant assumptions.

While it may not seem ground-breaking to be able to both praise and criticise one's own nation, it is nonetheless important to highlight given previous discussions in relation to sexuality and the nation.

LGBs (and many other minorities) have often not been allowed such nuanced opinions when it comes to national identity. Establishing this space and the idea of a ‘floating insider’ subjectivity allows for an analysis that pays attention to the specificities of individual experiences of the nation. Rather than dismissing any form of attachment as homonationalism, the interesting and subtle ways in which these attachments actually subvert hegemonic national narratives can subsequently be brought to light.

Subversion but not rejection

As national subjects then, as opposed to merely objects, individual LGBs can be seen as alternative writers of the nation. As a result, I see the stories articulated during this research as alternative, yet equally valid, stories of Danishness or Irishness. Bringing these narratives to the fore in this way allows for a spotlight on their complexities, and consequently the similarities and differences with well-known stories of Irishness and Danishness. I chose three areas in particular to analyse: narrative structure (turning points, temporality), characters and settings. Above all, what emerged was the impossibility of reconciling the features of hegemonic narratives with individual lives. For example, 1989 as *the* year of justice in Denmark or the Catholic Church as a simplistic villain in Ireland. As a result, hegemonic narratives are destabilised and space for alternative attachments to the nation is created. In essence, while hegemonic narratives are by no means irrelevant, they are reductive and subverted by individual experience in interesting ways.

Fundamentally, participants’ stories highlighted the fact that human experience, and subsequently our sense of self, derives from a rich tapestry of moments, conversations, places and much more. Narratives were therefore structured in a way that contained many more highs, lows and turning points than the hegemonic national narratives. Bhabha describes this contrast as the ‘split’ between the ‘performative’ (i.e. the everyday, dynamic experiences of the nation) and the ‘pedagogical’ (i.e. the instructive, ‘official’ version of the nation), with the latter assigning a linear quality to the narration of the nation (Bhabha 2006: 297). As evidenced by this research however, individual narration resists the neat directionality and chronological plot development of the pedagogical. Hegemonic narratives are often constructed around legislative turning points, dramatising the idea of singular and overnight shifts in LGB people’s lives, and leading to the idea of a steady, upward plot development. Personal narratives on the other hand were heavy on anecdotes and tangents, meaning that the timelines of Irishness/Danishness they recounted were anything but linear. One example of this messy temporality was the way past experiences were often realised as homophobic or negative only once they were narrated in the present. I therefore see them as

inherently disruptive of the blunt directionality that the linear timelines of hegemonic narratives assign to a whole group's experience.

As well as this temporal instability, it was interesting to note the events seemingly unrelated to the nation that participants constructed plots around. By foregrounding these, the authority of any official, singular, 'story' of sexuality in Denmark and Ireland is again destabilised. Participants across both national contexts invariably structured their story around individual experiences such as: 'coming out', moving away from where they grew up, significant relationships, their first Pride event or their first crush.

For example, Oliver described the years between 2016 and 2020 as fundamental to his identity construction. These years were marked by events such as: moving to Copenhagen, making his first gay friends and going to his first gay club. He described how his experiences in Copenhagen have contributed to his belief that it would not have been wise to come out in Bornholm, for the sake of maintaining friendships. Peter also emphasised events unique to his circumstances. He framed his coming out at age 20, in 1990, as a central turning point in his transition into adulthood, particularly in terms of his decision to leave Randers two years earlier, where he did not feel comfortable coming out.

Placing Oliver and Peter's stories alongside the *frisind* narrative, or as Peter Edelberg helpfully describes it, the 'traditional liberal story of stable identity categories and an overall sense of progress', where '1989 is the year of justice for homosexuals and Danish *frisind*' (Edelberg 2014: 59), a subversion of this reductive narrative becomes apparent. Nonetheless, rather than somehow disproving this liberal story, or denying the importance of 1989, I see participants stories as adding depth and complicating it. In the case of Peter, the juxtaposition of 1989 as a 'year of justice' with his description of moving away in 1988 and coming out in 1990, which he sees as 'kind of traumatic' is stark; finding comfort with his identity was clearly not an easy journey with overnight changes. While 1989 was before Oliver's lifetime, the trajectory of steady upward progress that it has come to symbolise is nonetheless disrupted by the fluctuating temporality of the way he represents coming out. His story suggests that it is necessary for time to pass before he is able to revise his understanding of how both himself and others perceived his sexual orientation growing up in Bornholm.

Irish stories also disrupted neat timelines of progress constructed around legislation (i.e. 1993 & 2015). Cara showed similarities to Peter and Oliver in the sense that she emphasised her move to Dublin in 1995 as the key moment in her story and identity construction. Oonagh also offered an interesting story

in this regard. She dedicated a large part of her story to the process of coming out, that is to say the events related to if and when her family and friends were aware of her sexual orientation. She described a period of secrecy between the years of 2013 and 2016, where she was seeing other women but hiding it from her family. When invited to tell her story as an Irish LGB subject, Oonagh made decisions which discursively constructed an identity and experience of Irishness that did not follow a timeline based on a narrative of 2015 as the culmination of acceptance.

Much like 1989 and the story of *frisind*, pointing this out is not about denying the significance of legislation or its effect on LGBs as a group, but disrupting the idea that one's sense of self and identity as an LGB person derives purely from being granted certain rights or not at a given moment in history.

In the same way that individual timelines inevitably diverged from legislative ones, the individual characters of their stories, in all their richness and variety, could never conform to the neat categories laid down by hegemonic narratives. Once again, I see this aspect of participants' narratives as containing a subversive potential. The Irish context was particularly revealing from a character perspective, with figures such as the 'Irish mammy', 'the school nurse' and above all 'the Catholic priest' appearing across multiple stories. Danes on the other hand tended to speak in much more general terms about 'Danes vs. non-Danes'.

The representation of the Catholic priest was a particularly interesting example of characterisation. As previously discussed, hegemonic narratives around contemporary Ireland and sexual orientation have tended to revolve around seeing the Catholic Church and its representatives as 'villains' or at the very least 'of the past'. LGB(IQ+) people on the other hand are presented as former pariahs that have now become shining emblems of the 'new Ireland'. By contrast, this study demonstrates that the Church is capable of being an inescapable frame of reference in Irish LGB lives and experiences, without falling into a reductive hero/villain dichotomy where the relationship is purely oppositional. When it came to the figure of the priest, although he often carried negative connotations or homophobic implications, he inevitably appeared as a more complex, albeit flawed figure than a caricatured villain. Whether in 1983 rural Ireland or modern-day Limerick, anecdotes characterised the priest richly, and did not represent him as simply the antagonist of the story. Rather than any judgment on the role of the Church in Irish life, I argue that this characterisation serves as a reminder that LGB people's everyday relationships and interactions negotiate societal changes in a more complex way than hegemonic narratives allow for.

Much as the priest did not conform to the caricatures of hegemonic narratives once actualised in individual stories, the particular settings in individual LGB lives could not conform to the idea of ‘Denmark’ or ‘Ireland’ as monolithic spaces, where the effects of a concept like *frisind* are experienced uniformly. In one way then, the multiplicity of descriptions I received of cities, villages and farms across Denmark and Ireland are already a subversion in themselves. To lean on Anderson, the nation-state as a space is intrinsically imaginary, as it is physically impossible to experience the whole of one territory at any time.⁷ Ideas of ‘Denmark’ or ‘Ireland’ that have proved so influential in legislation-based narratives are not such a factor in individual experience of the physical world.

The city, and above all the gay bar in the city (sometimes euphemistically referred to simply as ‘the scene’), was frequently evoked as a formative setting. In turn, I propose that we can read the gay bar as a subversive and non-national site of belonging. While talking about accessing the LGBTQ+ community, Pernille mentioned the following:

In Aarhus they had a gay bar, so they had like a way bigger gay community - they didn't have anything (in Kolding), like I never met a lesbian before I met the girl at Roskilde.

Although she locates the bar in Aarhus, and therefore Denmark, this detail feels incidental. The primary reason for the bar’s inclusion as a setting in her story is that it was where she was able to spend nights “kissing girls”. When Irish participants described experiences in gay bars, these also had different geographical descriptors attached, with Cara for example naming specific pubs or bars in Dublin. However, these descriptors do not negate the fact that the gay bar was represented universally across time and space as a site of negotiation, self-discovery, and security (or a combination of all three). While the broader national context and issues such as legislation may affect the existence of the gay bar in the first place, representations of it in this study were notable for what was shared across national contexts. The gay bar was experienced first and foremost as a gay bar in Ireland or Denmark as opposed to an Irish or Danish gay bar. Although it might seem natural that bars would not be explicitly framed in terms of a nationality, this is exactly why it is worth drawing attention to when thinking about how individuals experience the world. Sense of self as LGBs can be national in certain ways, while still deriving from more complex spatial experiences than simply ‘Denmark’ or ‘Ireland’. Settings such as the gay bar

⁷ Benedict Anderson’s influential *Imagined Communities* (1983), proposed the idea that national communities depend on the imagination, in the sense that their members must be able to imagine fellow, like-minded citizens without being physically co-present.

highlighted this complexity and challenge the idea of monolithic national spaces where neat national narratives are experienced uniformly.

With a disruption in place, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which hegemonic narratives were still drawn on to explore feelings of national attachment. After all, a subversion and opening up does not equate to complete detachment or rejection. For Irish LGBs, even if the legislation narrative based on 1993 and 2015 was not whole-heartedly endorsed, or significantly described in their personal lives, it still provided a framework when thinking about Irishness. Several described happy memories of the vote in 2015, and all expressed positive feelings of some sort around the decline of the Catholic Church's influence. Cara went as far as to say that on that day in 2015 she thought everyone felt 'very proud to be Irish', while two of the younger participants, Callum and Oonagh, specifically referred to 1993 in the sense that they were grateful to be living after that time. Even if participants didn't explicitly mention 2015 or 1993, all participants used temporal language to the effect of 'things are better now than before'. Regardless of empirical data about 2015,⁸ it clearly has the potential to represent a comforting idea of 'Ireland' that has been capable of leading to greater feelings of proximity to Irishness.

For Danish LGBs, there was no such symbolic event to draw on for feelings of Danishness. There were however a couple of interesting, albeit tentative, ways that dominant narratives were used to express individual national identity. As previously mentioned, there was often a sense of 'we the Danes' in the way participants spoke, which automatically produced a generic figure of the 'non-Dane'. This figure appeared across nearly all narratives at some point, as a way of exploring feelings of Danishness and relationships to the frontrunner and *frisind* narratives. Of course, the figure was given specificity and configured differently according to personal situations. Pernille's description of her Italian girlfriend led to a reflection about the comparative social conservatism between the countries, while Victor's encounters with American tourists as a waiter in Tivoli Gardens generated gratefulness for the Danish mentality of 'minding our own business'. Nonetheless I see all of the examples as evidence of a benign attachment to hegemonic narratives, rather than xenophobia or homonationalism. As Danes, 'we' understand and can draw on the ideas of Danishness or 'Denmark' embedded in these narratives, even if 'we' do not whole-heartedly endorse them and are nervous about explicit expressions of superiority.

⁸ The legislation was arguably late compared to many other Western European countries and only came about as a result of pressure from the junior party of the governing coalition, the Labour Party, rather than enthusiastic endorsement from the country's leaders.

Beyond Subversion

Having highlighted the capacity to both draw on and subvert hegemonic narratives, it is possible to take the findings of this research one step further when thinking about what the nation can mean for individuals. In his analysis of sexuality and the nation in the Indonesian context, anthropologist Tom Boellstorff describes the relationship between gay and lesbian Indonesians and national discourse as ‘one of resonances, borrowings, and transformations, rather than simply rejection’ (Boellstorff 2005: 208). As Boellstorff suggests, sexual minorities’ relationships with dominant national narratives do not have to be purely reactive, and can instead be marked by an agency to ‘borrow’ and ‘transform’. In the case of my study, I argue that my participants are not only national subjects, but actively involved in a practice of queering the nation. In this way, hegemonic narratives are redefined, not to make new, fixed narratives, but to recast them as permanently malleable, so that national identification is allowed to occur on a much more flexible and situational basis. As we have seen already, everyday life does not tend to present us with opportunities or situations that readily conform to dominant narratives, and the idea of customisation allows for a more relevant way of thinking about what the nation can mean for individuals.

Such a process, where the basic premise of the narrative is echoed before a personalised redefinition takes place, was in evidence throughout the narratives collected in this study. With its emphasis on tolerance and arguably passivity or harmful assimilationism,⁹ the agency implied by reshaping narratives is particularly interesting in the context of Danish *frisind*. In my conversations with Danish LGBs, there was undoubtedly a recognition of the potential negative effects of *frisind*, but this did not translate wholly into feelings of alienation or apathy towards the nation. Instead, there was an engagement with the commonly understood aspects of Danishness connected to *frisind*, which I see as representative of Boellstorff’s ‘borrowing’ and ‘transforming’.

Cecilie, a 73-year-old Danish woman who identifies as bisexual, homosexual, or bi-romantic, exemplified this idea of adopting distance towards received ideas of Danishness while also articulating a version of it relevant to her. She initially expressed reservations about the atmosphere of tolerance in Denmark, in that you were allowed to be only “a little different from the crowd”. When describing her life story

⁹ See Karin Lützen, “Gay and Lesbian Politics: Assimilation or Subversion: A Danish Perspective” (1998) for further discussion of Danish assimilationism and tolerance as a negative force for LGBTQs.

however, she demonstrated a more subtle interaction with the idea of Danishness. She recounted fond memories of involvement in a women's activist group in Denmark the 70s, followed by many years living in Norway. Reflecting on those years, she said:

I felt up there that there was something I missed from here, in some way it was a Danish tradition, a very new tradition you could say... Well I'm happy to be Danish, but it's not like oh I'm Danish!

The "tradition" Cecilie refers to was the "openness and ways of talking" that she experienced at the activist group in Denmark, which she mentioned several times during the interview as formative and having increased her sense of belonging as someone with same-sex attraction. Her experiences in the group were not experienced as 'Danish' at the time but became so afterwards during her time in Norway and its subsequent narration, so that we witness identification with the nation occurring situationally, or even momentarily. Moreover, Cecilie's story once again exemplifies the floating insider status, as we see her negotiating her distance from the nation. By dwelling on the meaning of her experiences, she carves out a vision of Danishness relevant to her, demonstrating that hegemonic narratives of Danish tolerance or liberalism can carry more prosaic and less exceptionalist meanings, that are brought into fruition by different relationships and life experiences at different times in people's lives. Above all, the sense of compromise she finally arrives at takes us one step further than instability or Bhabha's 'ambivalence'. With Cecilie, destabilisation has occurred and the narrative re-worked to suit her personal life story.

The ways in which Irish individuals negotiated the significance of 2015 in their personal relationships with national identity correspond to Cecilie's moulding of her national identity. For Cara and Sean, a 53-year-old gay man living in Dublin, the event represented a significant turning point because of the rights it gave them in areas such as inheritance and tax. At the other end of the spectrum, Aisling, a 29-year-old who grew up in Galway and identifies as bisexual or pansexual, approved of the vote as a sign that things were moving in the right direction but was otherwise disinterested and found the concept of the vote patronising. Regardless of the specificities, what is important is that the moment was capable of signifying many different things beyond simply celebration or an endpoint of inclusion. I argue that these meanings reflect an agency to mould the event to their particular life story as an Irish LGB, so that it is assigned a relevant position according to circumstance.

Control and flexibility are significant for the way they broaden and reformulate the hegemonic 'new Ireland' narrative, which arguably reduces LGB lives to the single issue of marriage equality. In addition,

some have argued that the celebratory aspect of this hegemonic narrative represents a loss of contact with alienation, which therefore ‘neutralizes and mainstreams queer memory to the point that it becomes content with inclusion’ (Cregan 2011: 194). Based on this study however, it is clear that a lack of alienation and positive memories of 2015 do not equate to contentment with inclusion. For example, Cara presented 2015 as one part of a wider fight to keep reforming Irish institutions and public life. For Oonagh and Aisling, 2015 undoubtedly has a positive presence in how they see themselves as Irish LGBs, but is reassigned as a mostly background event. The dominant narrative of 2015 as the epitome of a ‘new Ireland’ is therefore capable of being reworked individually, so that its celebratory aspect is maintained without it taking centre stage in people’s stories and representing only inclusion.

Such a process of control and flexibility in one’s identification with the nation is also productive in terms of how we interpret expressions of pride or pleasure in the nation, which were common to both sets of participants. These expressions can represent a form of attachment operating independently of co-option/transgression or acceptance/rejection dichotomies, and without the need to indicate essentialist identity categories or harm to others. When we hear Peter saying “of course I’m proud of being (Danish), I like seeing a Danish flag”, or Oliver that he “enjoys” a lot the “part of Danishness” where “we are innovative” and “first-movers”, the pleasure derived from national identity in that moment does not need to be essentialised as a permanent attachment to Danishness. If we trust in individuals’ ability to customise their relationship to the nation, then there is no need for expressions of pleasure to immediately be interpreted as feelings of Danish or Irish supremacy. As Billig points out, confessing to the pleasure of the nation is actually constructive for analysts. He personally uses the example of his greater interest in the home news pages or a ‘citizen from the homeland’ outperforming another country in a sporting event, but I see the same pattern in my participants’ individual enjoyment of national things. The most important thing is that Billig responds to his pleasure with the confession ‘why, I do not know’ (Billig 1995: 113). Once pleasure in national things is accepted, rather than scrutinised as a potential source of guilt or shame, then the focus can move onto how this customised way of identifying with narratives can be empowering.

Conclusion

This study’s discussion of a relationship at all between individual Irish and Danish LGBs and hegemonic national narratives is firstly important to emphasise. Instead of being simply something to dissociate from, Irish and Danish LGBs are capable of adopting a ‘floating insider’ status within the nation.

Fundamentally, this positionality means that the personal is national, and individual LGB narratives can also be seen as national narratives. Nonetheless, the range of Irish and Danish LGB experiences collected in this study are valuable not as some kind of alternative truth to the picture painted by hegemonic narratives, but as in productive conversation with it. Allowing space for this process is valuable for the destabilising effect it has on the directional and accumulative nature of hegemonic narratives constructed around legislation, as opposed to being a way of supplanting them.

In the context of previous research on sexuality and the nation, this study is significant for its application of Billig's 'banal nationalism' and Anderson's 'imaginary community' theories on national identity in a queer context, without leading to the 'inescapable fall into homonationalism'. The results of my research are not intended to disprove the theory of homonationalism, but to push back against the idea that the nation is inherently reactionary territory for LGBs to enter. Attachment to, and even pleasure in, the nation must be confronted and analysed constructively. The author Bidy Martin declared that we need to 'stop defining queerness as mobile and fluid in relation to what then gets construed and stagnant and ensnaring' (Martin 1996: 46). Martin's words go to the heart of my research; mobility and fluidity are the exact attributes my participants embodied in their relationship to the nation and its accompanying hegemonic narratives. Instead of a static concept that is 'stagnant and ensnaring' then, the nation can be queered into a site that is participatory and diffuse.

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