

# Anti-gender Politics in Queer Times

“Genderismus” and Norwegian Homonationalism

## ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, much of queer theory and sexuality studies has been engaged in analyzing and resisting the – often partial and exclusionary – assimilation of queer subjects into the cultural and economic fabric of the nation-state. As illiberal anti-gender rhetoric and politics (re)surface across Europe, it might seem as though queer theory ought to reconsider its critiques of queer liberalism and homonationalism – in the face of neo-fascist threats and LGBT-free zones, recourse to liberal ideals of human rights and national acceptance may assume increasing credibility and even urgency. But can anti-gender politics really be so neatly opposed to “progressive” values of gender equality and gay rights, as supposedly modeled by Nordic countries? This article seeks to complicate this apparent opposition between anti-gender politics and homonationalist rhetoric by tracing the racist and nationalist tendencies that transverse both projects. I argue that not only does the homonationalism or anti-gender politics binary disintegrate under scrutiny, but the binary framing itself works to further narratives of national exceptionalism that are parasitic upon, and reproduce, racialized exclusions. In particular, I rethink Norwegian homonationalism as a neoliberal assemblage in light of contemporary anti-gender rhetoric and policies, so as to understand how homonationalism and anti-gender politics not only coexist, but co-constitute each other in these times which are at once profoundly queer and deeply homophobic.

**Keywords:** homonationalisms, anti-gender, queer theory, sexual exceptionalism, Norway, human rights, heteronationalisms

**IN THE LAST** few decades, much of queer theory and sexuality studies has critiqued the partial and exclusionary assimilation of queer subjects into the cultural and economic fabric of the nation-state. Jasbir Puar's analysis of "homonationalism" in *Terrorist Assemblages* [2007] stands at the forefront of these numerous queer critiques of liberal humanism, Western feminism, and human rights discourse. She analyzes how claiming the status of a gay-friendly country has become an international political currency that can be used to justify neocolonial military intervention and anti-immigration policies, all while obscuring homophobia's and racism's domestic workings. In the 15 years since the publication of *Terrorist Assemblages*, however, we have seen the extensive (re)surfacing of anti-gender rhetoric and politics across Europe and throughout the globe. This (re)surfacing might first appear akin to a regression, as if the precarious folding into life of homonormative subjects has been superseded by a renewed pathologization of queerness. We see anti-gender "theorists" and countries coming out as proudly anti-gay, (re)centering the sanctity of the union of man and woman as the central building block of the nation. Gender now functions as "symbolic glue" for a range of different movements, policies, and ideas – including alt-right populists, conservative Catholics, and grassroot movements of concerned parents – by defining a common enemy of "the people," referred to by some as "the genderists" (Grzebalska, Kováts & Pető 2017). As several scholars have noted, the designation of "gender ideology" names a smorgasbord of disparate policies, organizations, and theoretical currents that are themselves contradictory – UN international policies, same-sex marriage, Freud, Butler, and queer theory writ large are all aligned with a grandiose conspiracy to destroy the family and the nation.

In the face of this anti-gender trend that threatens taken-for-granted human and sexual rights, it might be easy to defensively revert to those common-sense universalizing narratives once so thoroughly critiqued. Indeed, many mainstream political and some scholarly reactions have grasped for the very liberal ideas that have often been the target of critical interrogation in postcolonial queer studies: the universality of human rights; (white) state feminism; Western feminist parameters (pay

gap, glass ceilings, lean-in feminism....), and LGBT progress narratives.

In this article, I analyze several Norwegian and European examples of recourse to homonationalist rhetoric that present (Western) Europe as a progressive vanguard now under threat from “unEuropean” homophobia usually projected onto a racialized “uncivilized elsewhere” (Colpani & Hated 2014; Puar 2007). This framing was an explicit premise in the recent EU debate regarding European anti-gender sentiments when some members of the Parliament “tried to hijack the debate and attribute the cause of discrimination of LGBTIQ persons across the EU not to the actions of the countries called into question (e.g. Poland), but to the presence of Muslims across the EU” (Ammaturo 2021). As is abundantly evident in this example, the “uncivilized elsewhere” pinned against “progressive Europe” has traditionally been figured as “Muslim countries,” and even in less explicit examples, it is clear that the European homo- and femonationalist rhetoric on anti-gender movements is parasitic upon the larger structure of racialized homophobia.

The popular framing of racialized homophobia taking hold in (Eastern) Europe builds on a longer historical construction of the post-socialist countries as lagging behind the telos of Western Europe when it comes to gender and sexuality (Kováts 2021) – a discursive construction that both sustains the symbolic suturing of LGBT rights to (Western) European identity and allows certain Eastern European anti-gender actors to flip the narrative to represent themselves as the last vanguard against the “rainbow-tinged European threat” (Ayoub & Paternotte 2014, 1). This article critiques the racialized mapping that squarely places “‘homophobia’ in the Global South, or in [an ‘unwestern’] Eastern Europe” (Browne and Nash 2020a, 77), turning instead to the complicity between anti-gender rhetoric and its (neo)liberal counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

By critiquing this racialized mapping, I resist what I call the “rhetoric of mutual exclusion” between queer liberalism and anti-gender politics that works to localize anti-gender politics both in an elsewhere – often Eastern Europe and the Global South – and an elsewhere prior to the queer acceptance of Europe. This disarticulation highlights the resonances between anti-gender rhetoric and nationalist queer liberalism

covered up by their purported mutual exclusion – the two national(ist) formations are sutured by their racism, as they share a fear of the threat of “perverse queer populations” (Puar 2007, xii).

This analysis builds on the insight that anti-gender politics cannot be adequately understood as a regression or backlash (Pető & Grzelbalska 2016). Such a framing would suggest that an effective counter-mobilization should consist in reinvigorating the gender mainstreaming and sexual citizenship agenda which has been on the EU itinerary for years. Instead, homonationalism is not the antidote to the heteronationalism toward which (parts of) Europe are “relapsing”; rather, they work hand-in-hand as key facets of Modernity itself. As Fatima El-Tayeb puts it, the “mainstreamed gay discourse ... attempts to expand rather than dismantle heteronormativity by internalizing a conceptualization of LGBT identity that constructs legitimacy and rights along established lines, challenging neither the exclusion of those who do not or cannot play by the rules nor a system whose very existence depends on such exclusions” (2011, 125). Thinking of anti-gender rhetoric in queer times thus lets us shed light on the complex network of queer liberalism as working in tandem with the heteronationalisms it allegedly opposes.

### **The Rhetoric of Mutual Exclusion: The Norwegian Imaginary of Human Rights and Anti-gender Elsewheres**

When the former Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ine Eriksen Søreide, eliminated the financial support sent to the parts of Poland that declared themselves “LGBT-free zones” in 2020, her justification was that these zones are at odds with “the collective European value-system” that is built on “diversity and freedom.” She went on to state that “human rights are universal. All states have a duty to protect them, and sexual orientation is an important part of this. For *us*, this is very important politics” (Falnes 2020; my translation and emphasis). Her statement was echoed in the EU parliament counter-declaration of Europe as an “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone” in 2021, where Norway’s withdrawal of economic support was cited in the declaration as an inspiration (European Parliament). While it is clear that Poland’s homophobic

zones need to be combated, this framing nevertheless should be interrogated, insofar as it reproduces a teleological narrative in which the “good progressive Europe” is threatened by ideas that belong to an elsewhere or elsewhere (something more explicitly articulated in discourses framing Eastern Europe’s anti-gender turn as a return to the Middle Ages) (Petó & Grzelbalska 2016). The performative utterance of Europe as an “LGBTIQ Freedom zone” clearly confirms the “imagined ‘Europeanness’ of LGBT rights, which [has] been used in geopolitical contests at the margins of the continent” (Paternotte & Ayoub 2014, 2). This utterance is steeped in European homonationalism contributing to the representation of the region as a “sexual fortress under siege,” in need of protection from dangerous outsiders (Colpani & Hated 2014, 74).<sup>2</sup> Against this foil, we might understand Søreide’s statement as reinforcing Norway as Europe’s vanguard – a trailblazer within trailblazing territory.

Particularly interesting is Søreide’s simultaneous acknowledgement of diversity and freedom as explicitly European values and of human rights as “universal.” This illuminates how being gay-friendly is at once configured as a domain proper to Europe and as a universally mandated value to be imposed everywhere else. As Puar suggests in her engagement with Amy Kaplan, the “concurrent ‘paradoxical claim to uniqueness and universality’ are coterminous in that ‘they share a teleological narrative of inevitability’ that posits America as the arbiter of appropriate ethics, human rights, and democratic behavior while exempting itself without hesitation from such universalizing mandates” (2007, 8). While Puar is specifically concerned with American exceptionalism here, Søreide’s comments and the EU declaration point to a parallel positioning of European and Norwegian values as at once singular and universal. Thus, the contradictory claim of human rights as both particularly European *and* universal relies on the dual functioning of European and Norwegian exceptionalism as both *the exception* in an otherwise homophobic world – it has crucial competence when it comes to sexual and human rights missing elsewhere – and as *exceptional* in the way that it surpasses the alleged universal development towards human

rights for all, where a teleological progress narrative modeled by Europe is taken for granted. This builds on an idea of “Europeanness” as the hallmark of universality (to come), wedded to an idea of “civilization [which] posit[s] some individuals and some peoples as less civilized than others” (Paternotte & Ayoub 2014, 15). This framing is also central to the mainstream LGBT movement in Europe and in Norway, as seen most recently in the 2021 Norwegian Pride being organized around the hashtag #Europe4all (see Engebretsen 2021 for a thorough interrogation of the exclusionary and (neo)liberal underpinnings of Norway’s homonationalist securitization of pride celebrations post 22/7). Indeed, the liberal and assimilationist appeals to national recognition, citizenship, and respectability that have dominated many strands of the rights-based LGBT movement are precisely what has allowed nation-states like Norway to effectively promulgate homo- and femonationalism as part of their international currency.

This nationalist framing of Norway as a source of inspiration for “uncivilized elsewhere” is even more explicitly mirrored in the report “Seven Challenges to LGBTI Equality – and How the Nordic Cooperation can Solve Them,” which states that the Nordic region can “become a beacon of hope – or a rainbow, if you will – in a world where progress in this area unfortunately can no longer be taken for granted” (Agleedal 2021, section “The way forward”). As Erika Alm and Elisabeth Lund Engebretsen point out, “the pan-Nordic state-sponsored idea that this region can be singled out as a global beacon against the troubled Rest of the World, seems at the very best a naïve supposition, and could well be argued to be a part of a long-established Nordic homonationalist ideology of exceptionalism” (2021, 10).

The Norwegian claim to be *the exception* in an otherwise homophobic world is propped up by the rhetoric of mutual exclusion with Eastern Europe and a “uncivilized elsewhere” more generally, often figured by Middle Eastern and African countries (Puar 2007; Haritaworn 2015). The image of Norway as the savior of women and LGBT populations was the platform that got Norway elected to the UN Security Council in 2020. After the successful election, Søreide proclaimed that countries

that voted against Norway most likely did so because they were insufficiently pro-human rights, reinforcing the idea that being pro-human inevitably means being pro-Norwegian international policies (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2019).

While Søreide easily represents Norway as the beacon of LGBT rights both in Europe and in the world, Norway was itself until recently heavily criticized for violating trans people's human rights by instituting forced sterilization as a requirement to change one's legal gender – a practice that continued into 2016. Even though the expert group appointed by the government to investigate the practice concluded that it was in violation of several core human rights, the government has yet to issue a public apology or give compensation to those forcefully sterilized. This selective amnesia, which obscures internal violations of human rights while positioning Norway as the defender of human rights, is however not so perplexing when we take a closer look at “the human rights industrial complex” (Puar 2013). The fetishization of human rights intervention always locates sexual repression elsewhere, so that the Global North comes to stand in for the progressive liberation of sexuality while countries in the Global South are read through the conflation of state repression with sexual repression. Indeed, human rights has become something of an empty signifier, “a technique deployed to measure the progress of states, becoming both the normative language of how injustice is measured, and a means through which powerful nation-states might discipline weaker ones,” often while exempting themselves from the alleged standards of which they claim to be a beacon (Eng 2010, 106). Thus, human rights discourse functions ideologically to separate the world into gay-friendly and homophobic countries along racialized geopolitical vectors – a discourse that is now bolstered by the framing of unwestern ideology invading (Eastern) Europe, allowing the EU, and more specifically Norway's LGBT movement, to reinforce the framing of itself as the ultimate protector of the “queer European citizen” (Ammaturo 2015, 1155).

If Norwegian exceptionalism feeds off the rhetoric of mutual exclusion, its inverse can be found in the anti-gender movement's claims

that Western elites are colonizing Eastern Europe and the rest of the world. One prime example of this oppositional framing is Hungary and Poland's adoption of "family mainstreaming" to counteract the "gender mainstreaming" imposed by the EU and UN to destroy their traditional value (Pető & Grzelbalska 2016). As Paternotte and Ayoub remark, the discourse of post-socialist countries having to catch up with the progress of the West on LGBT rights in order to be Europeanized has also laid the groundwork for a powerful counternarrative. The binary that delimited Europe from "the not-so-enlightened ... East [that] still need[s] to catch up in civilisational terms, triggered opposition – it became politically articulated in a polarizing language by the right-wing anti-gender actors" by framing the CEE region as the last frontier in the fight against gender ideology (Kováts 2021, 84).<sup>3</sup> As Ayoub argues in the context of the region, the resistance to adopting international LGBT rights norms is often tied to a nationalist – and religious – fear mongering around an external threat invading one's borders (2016, 202).<sup>4</sup> Even though it has been widely documented that anti-gender campaigns are not strictly an Eastern European phenomenon, but an increasingly global network with differing national articulations (e.g. Italy, Germany, France, Ireland, Austria, and Brazil), Eastern European countries often acquire an overdetermined role in the popular imaginary of resisting gender ideology. These Eastern European countries also pride themselves on their distinctive (hetero)sexual exceptionalism. This strategic myopia allows for both the regional resurrection of anti-EUropean nationalism priding itself on being an alternative to sexual-rights-as-human-rights, and the notion of "European citizenship grounded in the liberal concept of 'tolerance'" to get away not only unscathed, but strengthened (Ammaturo 2015; Petersen 2014).

A prime example of this imaginary is presented by the German sociologist Gabriele Kuby, when she argues that because the post-Soviet states are less "tainted" by the aftermath of the sexual revolutions of '68, they have an advantaged position when it comes to resisting gender ideology today.



A new totalitarianism is developing under the cloak of freedom. But now the East European countries are becoming aware of this trend, and my book seems to be helping awaken people. The destruction has not gone as far here and people are motivated to resist it. My great hope is that these East European [sic] countries will become a stronghold of resistance in the European Union. (Kuby 2014)

Kuby labels Eastern European countries the final frontiers of traditional gender and sexual norms, alone able to resist the totalitarianism of Western human rights discourse. Nordic countries, in contrast, have sometimes served as the ultimate horrific examples of what gender ideology does when it takes hold in a society, as seen in the unfounded claims by several anti-gender preachers that Scandinavian countries have legalized incest and pedophilia. In another example, the youth organization of KDNP, which is in a collational Alliance lead by the Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Órban stated that we “cannot afford the same luxury as certain *Scandinavian countries*, where the signs posted on bathroom doors are among the most important points of public debate. ... It must be accepted that there are biological sexes, not social ones” (as quoted in Kováts 2019a, emphasis mine). The Norwegian show *Hjernevask* (Brainwash) has functioned as a privileged example of the inevitable failure and decadence of gender ideology to the anti-gender crowd; “In Norway, a trailblazer country for gender mainstreaming, unexpected resistance arose from a popular comedian, Harald Eia, who subjected the Norwegian creed of gender equality to a reality check” (Kuby 2015, 278). Just as Norway might frame Eastern European regression as anti-Nordic and even anti-Western, several Eastern European heteronationalisms build on the rhetoric of mutual exclusion between “the West” – particularly the Scandinavian countries – and their own national identities.

### **National Sexual Exceptionalism: The Family and the Patriarch**

In her 2019 New Year’s speech, the former Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg infamously asked Norwegians to have more children to sustain the welfare state. A more extreme valence of boosting fertility

is found in current Hungarian policies granting loans to young married heterosexual couples converted to grants if the couple has at least three children within the required timeframe. This latter policy has been explained in unequivocally racist anti-immigration terms by Órban: “Instead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender” (Walker 2020). While Solberg’s call for more Norwegian children was obviously not stated in such explicitly xenophobic terms, it nevertheless insidiously resonates in its emphasis on “nationally bred” children (see also Kristensen 2020 for a discussion of the racialization of pronatalist discourses).

While in this instance, Solberg’s speech seemed to primarily target heteronormative families, a central feature of Norwegian sexual exceptionalism is the assimilation of the queer nuclear family into the framework of nationalist gender equality. “In the construction of Norwegian exceptionalism, the liberated gay subject is a Western, white, able-bodied, educated, and affluent individual, a figure fully capable of taking part in Norwegian cultural values, including family institutions” (Petersen, Kroløkke & Myong 2017, 87). Same-sex marriage and equal rights to adoption have been understood as some of the most important national struggles – and victories – for queer inclusion. As Mühleisen, Røthing and Svendsen argue, “marriage, or the ‘patriarchal nuclear family’ (...) seems to have become the norm for all sexual relationships, regardless of gender and sexuality. The Gender-Neutral Marriage Act implemented on 1 January 2009 can thus be seen as the last accomplishment of the Norwegian state’s extensive will to reform” (2012, 141). The state’s homonormative and neoliberal adaptability is facilitated by a reformist and liberal LGBT movement steeped in a Western rights rhetoric that takes the queer liberal subject able to participate in the “bourgeois family, domesticity, and marriage” as its primary starting point (Eng 2010, 17), largely foreclosing a critique of the constitutive exclusions that such a legible subject is based upon (Petersen 2014).

The fantasy of the liberated gay subject works in tandem with the ideal of a masculinity that is both “soft and hard, feminist and patriarch ... where gender equality and paternal leave count as a measurement of the

nation's greatness" (Petersen, Kroløkke & Myong 2017, 89). The quota for paternal leave, a key national marker of state feminism, is seamlessly transferred to the Medmor [translated perhaps as withmom/together-mom] in families with two mothers, so as to fold queer families into the preexisting gender-equal branding of the Norwegian family. A central principle of Norwegian exceptionalism is the acceptance of the gender-equal/queer nuclear family as a site of the social regeneration of the nation-state (and its whiteness), a family structure that is continuously framed as being under threat from less progressive racial others (Dahl & Andreassen 2021). Thus, the Norwegian prime minister's call for producing more "Norwegian children" echoes the rhetoric of Nordic queer and gender equality being threatened by racial others having too many children, a fear that was far more explicit in the Hungarian policies.

This national (homo)sexual exceptionalism centered on a slightly expanded version of the nuclear family encounters its inverse in the national (hetero)sexual exceptionalism espoused by anti-gender rhetoric. Gabriele Kuby attacks "same-sex marriage" (apparently written in quotation marks to suggest that a legitimate marriage is only between a man and a woman) for dissolving the family (2015). For her, the legalization of same-sex marriage is symptomatic of the gender ideology that the West is imposing to destroy the heterosexual family – an imposition which allegedly goes hand-in-hand with the "postmodern" replacing of sex with "the choice of gender." While this misguided accusation is obviously haunted by transphobia, it also reinstates the mutually exclusive relation between masculinity and femininity as central to the healthy reproduction of the nation. The complementarity of the man and woman is increasingly endangered by feminists who purportedly "make men invisible" in the new gender-equal order (2015, 131). In some ways, we might understand this articulation of masculinity under threat as against the foil of the Norwegian "feminist patriarch." For the anti-gender crowd, the feminized man is a threat both to masculinity itself and to the reproduction of humankind in general. The resurgence of a visible traditional patriarch is then framed as essential to the integrity of the nation and the proper upbringing of children. In this elaboration

we see that the family is again constructed as being under threat – this time by powerful Western gender ideology.

What is concealed by this rhetoric of mutual exclusion, is that both articulations of masculinity discipline the national(ist) gender order. The claim to exceptional masculinity – be it the traditional man envisioned as complimentary to the woman, or the feminist patriarch – are both produced as signs of the nation’s identity and vigor in contrast to other disavowed versions of masculinity. Further, if nationalism is one common thread between hetero- and homonationalist masculinities, another is their reinscription of the gender binary. On the one hand, the articulation of the feminist patriarch in Norway may appear to minimize – and perhaps even erase – gender difference. Yet, this patriarch’s very exceptionality is expressed through his surprising straddling of stereotypical binary traits of gender. The notion of the man who does the dishes and changes the diapers while having a full-time job and serving as the head of the family is sensationalized precisely because of its assumed unlikeliness. Thus, the feminist patriarch often has to rely upon binary and static understandings of gender – indeed, much like the ones preached by anti-gender thinkers – that only an extraordinary Norwegian masculinity can bridge.

In both instances, the call for the proper national family is constructed as the exception in an otherwise derailed world – either a world infested by gender ideology or one haunted by homophobia and sexism. These national sexual exceptionalisms also allow parallel savior narratives to blossom – while the myth of Nordic “queer heavens” (Lykke 2020, 112) wedded to its state feminist gender equality permits the region to market itself as the global front-runner in sexual-rights-as-human-rights, the anti-gender crowd has produced its own narrative of becoming an alternate heterosexual “global savior” (Kuby 2015, 278).

### **Nationalist Xenophobia: The “Genderists” and “Perversely Sexualized Populations”**

In 2018, the chair of Poland’s ruling party, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, stated: “we are dealing with a direct attack on the family and children. (...) [The] entire LGBT movement, gender, (...) [are] imported, but today they

actually threaten our identity, our nation, its continuation and therefore the Polish state” (Gera 2019). Kaczynki imagines a homogenous national identity structured around the heterosexual nuclear family, that has to be protected from ‘deviant’ imported gender ideologies – and populations. While the threat he explicitly constructs here is imposed primarily by Western Europe and the US, it is vital to consider that his party won the election in 2016 on an aggressively Islamophobic anti-immigrant platform. Kaczynki feverishly embraces Poland’s racial homogeneity, infamously stating that Muslim immigrants “bring parasites and protozoa” while arguing that multiculturalism is a “fiasco” (Ciobanu 2019). The dissolution of the family and the prospect of mass immigration are aligned as dangers; both so-called genderists and (Muslim) immigrants – also often imagined as sexually deviant – threaten the well-being of Polish children and the health of the nation. While the anti-gender crowd is heterogeneous, the anxieties of gender ideology coupled with fears of perversely sexualized racial others are a common denominator. As Browne and Nash emphasize, European heteroactivists rely heavily on a discourse that tethers whiteness to Christianity and traditionality in order to distinguish themselves from the specter of racialized others threatening at the borders (2020b, 378).

The racist meta-framing of immigration as a threat to the nation has a more insidious counterpart in Norwegian exceptionalism, where “the rise of anti-immigration agendas in the 1990s was largely tied to discourses seeking to portray the Scandinavian welfare states as vulnerable to immigration” (Petersen, Kroløkke & Myong 2017, 103). There has been a turn towards a hardline approach in Norwegian immigration discourse, which asserts that the welfare state and its values must be protected from immigrants unable to integrate. In the collective national imaginary, Norway is increasingly constructed as the ultimate country to move to – either, on the right, as a safe haven that should be protected from the constant flow of immigrants because of exploitation of Norway’s “naïve niceness,” or, on the left, as an exceptional country that should take responsibility by saving (some) people fleeing from more “repressive countries” (Farris 2017). Ironically, even as Norwegian

gender and sexual equality is framed as in need of state protection from “intruders,” those very values increasingly rely on importing low-paid labor power to do necessary care work in the age of the neoliberalization of welfare – just think about the outrageous(ly exploitative) au pair system in Norway (Sandberg & Elomäki 2020). Queer liberalism and neoliberalism function symbiotically; as David Eng argues by way of Jodi Melamed, the “hyperextraction of surplus value from racialized bodies” is facilitated by – and facilitates – the rise of the idea of a narrow, depoliticized homonormative and gender equal liberal subject who can be interpolated into the fabric of the nation (2010, 9).

Accompanying – and partially motivating – this Norwegian trend of anti-immigration rhetoric is the rise of the right-wing populist party *Fremskrittspartiet* (FRP, or the Norwegian Progress Party). FRP gained governmental power for the first time in 2013, moving from being perceived as a political outlier to a semi-respectable party able to govern. FRP’s core political platform is the restriction of so-called non-Western immigration to protect the nation from “the increasing threat from Islamists” (*Prinsipp- og handlingsprogram 2017–2021*). The former leader of FRP, Siv Jensen, was awarded the 2018 *faghag* prize – which is, according to the *Gaygalla* (a gala organized to honor people who have contributed to progress for the LGBT+ population), a “social, not political prize” given to the best gay friend of the year (Nordli 2018).

FRP frames itself as being “a party of the people,” embodying their anti-establishment rhetoric by having politicians simply “tell it like it is,” defying the politically correct elite – a rhetoric shared by anti-gender actors who frame themselves as speaking up against the so-called stifling of their speech when people call them “racist,’ ‘homophobe’ [or] ‘Islamophobe’” or transphobe (Browne & Nash 2020b, 251). This rhetorical framing is especially evident in FRP’s often contradictory statements regarding LGBT rights; while the former leader of their Youth Party (FpU), Bjørn-Kristian Svendsrud, is gay and has had a public presence during the Pride parade, Sylvi Listhaug, the party’s current leader – who earlier left her position as Minister of Justice due to a highly controversial (read: racist and Islamophobic) Facebook post – criti-

cized the leader of the National Christian party (KrF) for participating in Pride, stating that “you don’t need to participate in the Pride Parade to distance yourself from the horrible murders of gay people happening around the world” (Bugge 2017, my translation).<sup>5</sup> What their politicians have in common, however, is their narrow, (cautiously) celebratory focus on the progressive state of LGBT rights in Norway – often conceived as already-won battles for individual queer liberation (battles that they, ironically, fought against historically) – combined with their representation of “backwards” Muslim countries and peoples as “the real enemy” of queer people (see Engebretsen 2021 for an interrogation of FRP and their depoliticized pinkwashing at Pride, as well as Klatran 2021 for the racialized rhetoric of LGBT hate crime in Oslo). Indeed, “positing homophobia and sexism as defining characteristics of Muslim communities to the point that they have become *the* shorthand for the supposed incompatibility of ‘Islam’ and ‘Europe’ requires at least a rhetorical commitment to the threatened values by Europe’s defenders, even if their actual investment in them is [often] more than doubtful” (El-Tayeb 2012, 83). Much like anti-gender rhetoric, FRP’s discourse is overtaken with the threat of “terrorist look-alikes” to the nation – a discourse now strategically linked to the (precarious) protection of Norwegian exceptional queer tolerance (Puar 2007).

### **Whose Western Values? Religion and The Framing of Multiculturalism**

Common to both the anti-gender xenophobic formulations and their homonationalist Norwegian counterparts is the fear of “perversely sexualized *populations*” of racial others, either contrasted with the “good queer” *subject* or with the heterosexual family, as two alternative markers of a highly developed Western culture (Puar 2007). In anti-gender movements, explicit resonances between the fear of multiculturalism and the fear of the ominous gender ideology often lead to seemingly contradictory framings of so-called Western values. On the one hand, gender ideology is read as the culmination of a postmodern subversion of Western Enlightenment heritage gone awry, now colonizing the rest

of the world; as the anti-gender thinker Marguerite Peeters warns, “the operational partnership between the western postmodern intelligentsia and international organizations since the 1960s” has made “the gender perspective [into a] global” governing mechanism, increasing its reach into traditional societies (Peeters as quoted in Zenit 2011). This narrative allows for the framing of Eastern Europe against the wayward West. On the other hand, anti-gender thinkers are invested in protecting the true “Western heritage”; as Marguerite Peeters rhetorically asks, “should we reject everything that is in the Western society or should we wish for a return to the past?” The latter alternative largely comes out as the winner for anti-gender actors; they converge around the need to retrieve Anglo-Saxon Western culture, something that allows them to reproduce “both longevity and whiteness” (Browne & Nash 2020b, 310). Thus, anti-gender thinkers articulate an ambivalent relation to the contemporary West, where they are the only ones who can unmask – and revive – the true Western values to be saved both from non-Western influences and from Western postmodernists.

In this ambivalent landscape, the figure of the Muslim immigrant takes on a dual function: on the one hand, the “forced integration” of Muslims in Europe goes hand-in-hand with gender ideology’s totalitarian imposition of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion, while on the other, Muslims are seen as inherently resistant to gender ideology, as fundamentally homophobic and traditional. In this latter vein, some anti-gender theorists see immigration as paving the way to “the definitive end of genderism” (Unterberger, quoted in Mayer & Sauer 2017, 35). Kuby proposes a similar notion; “the crisis ensuing from the uncontrolled mass immigration to Europe since autumn of 2015, mainly of young Muslim men (...), will reveal the gender agenda to be the delusion of a decadent society and put us back on the solid ground of human reality – man and woman, father, mother, and children” (2015, 280). By positioning the Muslim as inherently homophobic and anti-Western, Kuby tries to have her cake and eat it too; she can reinforce the danger of “uncontrolled mass immigration” to Western values, while hoping that immigration will lead gender ideology to its death. Fleetinglly, Kuby points out that the



pope and Catholic countries have stood together with Muslim countries against UN gender mainstreaming, seemingly entertaining the idea that they are allies against the global elites. She is quick, however, to distance Catholicism from Islam, insisting that there is a deep-seated difference between the two, because “Christians categorically reject persecution of homosexuals as it is practiced in many Muslim countries in the name of Sharia law” (2015, 116). While suggesting that both Muslims and Christians see through gender ideology, she is still able to imagine Muslims as “violent savages” while Christianity is the face of forgiveness itself. This allows Kuby to strategically position European anti-gender actors as “benign in contrast to the racialised, homophobic other,” thus reinstating whiteness through the rhetorical ruse of the homophobic Muslim (Browne and Nash 2020b, 309). Anti-gender actors therefore explicitly participate in the colonial imaginary of civilized Western countries versus barbaric, pre-modern violent ones – the very same imaginary that haunts homo- and femonationalist rhetorics of progress.

Another common thread across the homo and hetero-nationalist civilizational discourses is the conflation of religion and culture, where Islam is imagined as a religious *and* cultural paradigm stuck in a pre-modern era. As a former FRP Minister rhetorically asked in a national newspaper, “imagine if Norway’s fastest growing religion had a system of values that distanced itself from the freedom and equality that our society is built on – and the political majority were positive towards it” (Tybring-Gjedde 2016). The phantasmatic threat that migration poses to the national values of freedom and equality is inherently linked to the conflation of religion, culture, and visual economy; all “terrorist look-alikes” are collapsed into an amorphous “Muslim population,” so that their (assumed) culture and “religion [is framed as] an inherent hatred of anything queer” (Haritaworn 2015, 160).

Shortly after winning a seat in the UN security council in 2020, the Norwegian government made two announcements regarding their refugee policies: they would prioritize LGBT refugees through the UN quota system; and they would explicitly prioritize religious minorities, most prominently Christian refugees – a decision that came about as a

result of bargaining with FRP.<sup>6</sup> I believe that the proximity of the two announcements, as well as surrounding public discussions about the racist and Islamophobic symbolism of FRP's win, deserves interrogation. While one might be tempted to celebrate the first announcement as a sign of the inclusivity of the Norwegian state, I argue that these closely juxtaposed announcements underwrite the oppositional binary between Islam and queerness by phantasmatically linking Christian precarity and LGBT precarity, while also reemphasizing Norway as a safe haven for LGBT people – even for the unlikely “good queer ethnics” (Puar 2007, 28). The acceptance of (Christian) LGBT refugees in Norway reproduces the guise of the nation as diverse and tolerant, such that “the figure of the queer or homonormative ethnic is crucial for the appearance of diversity” (28). As the organization Skeiv Verden (Queer World) emphasized in their response to the government update, it is primarily lip service showing Norway as a haven of queer tolerance; the government did not add an extra quota for LGBT refugees on top of the quota they are already accepting, and LGBT refugees are already a prioritized minority in the UN. Not only does the “discourse of LGBT refugees enhance ‘civilisational politics,’ it also hides a fundamental aversion to migration flows in Europe [and Norway], considered to endanger the socio-cultural and economic stability” of the nation (Ammaturo 2015, 1157).

Furthermore, the construction of the queer “genuine refugee” forces people to articulate their sexuality in accordance with Norwegian (homo)sexual norms – what Akin calls sprinkling the Rainbow splash – while at the same time painting their home country as backwards and unsafe, thus embracing the Norwegian state as the ultimate savior (2018). In the process of assessing who is authentically queer, an underlying anxiety comes to the fore: “Are they really LGBT or are they misusing the asylum system?” (Akin 2018, 35). The attempt to stabilize this anxiety relies on a further strengthening of the dominant Norwegian LGBT movement’s reliance on the homonormative, respectable and legible subject/citizen/family as the starting point for politics, rights, and state recognition. The explicit privileging of Christian refugees vis-à-vis that of LGBT refugees thus propagates an “exclusionary inclusion”

whereby the protection of certain queer subjects serves as the alibi for the exclusion of other perversely sexualized populations.

Another example of hollow multiculturalism functioning as a national currency can be seen in a humorous 2013 political campaign by the left-wing socialist party SV (see figure 1), responding to FRP’s monopoly on defining so-called Norwegian values. The campaign depicts the poster image of the happy Norwegian multiculturalism that anti-gender movements fear; we see immigrants enthusiastically embracing Norwegian values in their bunads (the traditional Norwegian national attire), even offering to hug right-wing politicians who spout racist propaganda, side-by-side white politicians eating kebab. The “threat” of Islamization that the right has been spouting is nowhere to be found; instead, we see the proud waving of the rainbow and UN flags. The message of the campaign is abundantly clear: the integration of immigrants into the Norwegian value system is not failing, as the right would have us

**Figure 1:**

*Photo: Åsmund Holien Mo*

U.L: “Let’s talk about Norwegian values.”

M.L: “One of the most beautiful things about our country is that everyone can marry the one they love.”

B.L: “The trip to the city is not the same without diversity.”

U.R: “It is when you deserve it the least that you need it the most. Per Sandberg come and get an immigrant hug.”

M.R.: “Where is the ‘hidden Islamization,’ Siv?”

B.R.: “Hm! After eight years with SV [the Socialist Leftparty] in the government I still can’t locate the Sharia-paragraf.”



believe, but is in fact happening seamlessly, precisely because Norway is exceptionally tolerant and open-minded.

This image of “neoliberal multiculturalism” (Melamed 2006) succeeds by producing individual ethnic *subjects* distanced from the very same threatening, unknowable *population* that both anti-gender thinkers and FRP alike see as destroying the nation. While the people of color in this campaign are called upon to wear bunads and pose in front of traditional wooden cabins to emphasize that they are enthusiastically pro-Norwegian values, the white person’s tolerance is simply marked through his enjoying kebab on his night out.

In this production of national longing, we see the workings of what Puar terms the “unrequited love” that keeps (exceptional) multicultural subjects within the nationalist fabric, having to continually and enthusiastically profess their love for a nation-state that is built on exclusionary and xenophobic policies, dominated by a neoliberalization of welfare that differentially disenfranchises people of color (2007, 26). What truly makes you Norwegian is not your background – as Audun Lysbakken said during the campaign – but what you stand for, which in this case is such a love for #norwegianvalues that you would even hug an explicitly racist right-wing politician to prove it.

Of course, the invitation to get an immigrant hug did not go unnoticed by Per Sandberg, the FRP politician targeted, who promptly responded by posting an image to prove himself capable of receiving such hugs (figure 2). Leaving aside the fact that Per Sandberg – the man in the middle of the picture clenching his kebab – appears visibly uncomfortable, we see that even FRP is able to rehabilitate individual “good ethnics” by putting on an image of unlikely multiculturalization (Puar 2007, 32). The underlying logic that severs the “good ethnic” from the queered “hateful others” remains intact across the two opposing campaigns, and mimics the threat explicitly stated by the anti-gender crowd. The former has simply broadened the idea of “successful integration” to produce an image of Norway dominated by exceptional multiculturalism, while FRP holds onto this “good ethnic” as an even more unlikely exception to the rule. Neither one questions the underlying log-



**Figure 2**

*Photo: Helge Mikalsen/VG*  
Per Sandberg  
responding to the  
SV campaign by  
receiving so-called  
immigrant hugs.

ic of loving the nation-state, which is reaffirmed as the unquestionable premise of the debate. By examining these two (humorous) campaigns as symptomatic of the range of the Norwegian political landscape, we are confronted with the fact that homonationalism is not the domain of a particular right-wing gay-friendly racism that can be opted out of through calls for multiculturalism; instead, it is a structuring premise of political debate itself, which we are all, in different ways, complicit with.

## **Conclusion**

In these anti-gender times, the wish to defend liberal democracy and sexual-rights-as-human-rights has made some all too willing to dispense with critiques of those very universalities. This article problematizes such recourse to universalisms insofar as it falls back on a rhetoric of mutual exclusion between progressive feminist and LGBT politics versus reactionary anti-gender backlash. If we take seriously that “the production of queer liberalism and the discourse of racialized immigrant homophobia are two sides of the same liberal coin” (Eng 2010, 33), it becomes clear that neither promoting the European “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone” nor celebrating Norway as the beacon of European queerness and gender equality are sufficient responses to anti-gender sentiments – if anything, these counterreactions simply reinforce a recourse to neoliberal subjectivity and Western and national supremacy.

By moving beyond the framing of tolerant versus exclusionary and homophobic nations that structures anti-gender nationalist rhetoric,

right-wing populism in Norway, as well as many liberal responses to both, one can begin to interrogate the exclusion of “perversely sexualized populations” as constitutive of the nation-state and Europe as such (Puar 2007, 28). The point is not to simply call out actors who use pinkwashing to present themselves as untarnished, but rather, to recognize our collective, “complex complicities” with homo- and heteronationalisms, so as to open up a space for resisting and resignifying it from within (Puar 2017, 229). This resignification must necessarily begin from a dialogue between post-colonial queer theory, transfeminism(s), and critical race theory, offering up a nonhomogenizing critical project that does not revert to some notion of the smallest common denominator. While I did not have the space to do so properly here, I hope that these theoretical nodes will help further expose anti-gender formulations within Norway and the Nordics – a topic that remains rather understudied. Such investigations could also illuminate how the contemporary hostile debate climate around trans\* people in Norway has allowed transphobic tenets of anti-gender rhetoric to flourish under the guise of freedom of speech in a way that is parasitic upon racialized structures of agency and silence. We are indeed still living in queer times, even as anti-gender rhetoric intensifies, precisely because homonationalism itself is parasitic upon, rather than oppositional to, heteronormative valorization of life and its structuring xenophobia.

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## NOTES

1. Browne and Nash suggest the term “heteroactivism” to replace the more commonly used “anti-gender politics” to, among other things, resist the naturality of this geopolitical mapping of progress along an axis of assumed civilization (2020ab). While I use the term “anti-gender politics,” I am nevertheless building on Browne and Nash’s critical insights; this article might also be read as a response to their encouragement for scholars to study “how heteroactivism works with, or contests, homonationalism” (2020a, 78).
2. During the debate in the EU parliament, MEP Comin stated that “Europe’s strength in the world depends on how it defends human rights within its borders. It has to defend the right of LGBTIQ people but if we don’t defend it, we are encouraging it [discrimination] around the world. We are endangering millions of lives” (as quoted in Ammaturo 2021). As Ammaturo argues, “this statement vividly encapsulates the mission *civilisatrice* that [builds] the narrative of progress in the EU for LGBTIQ rights on the back of racialised others in the Global South whose lives are considered to be at peril, allegedly because of the actions of the EU ... MEPs effectively managed to mobilise a two-pronged homonationalist discourse with the first prong directed towards the ‘unruly’ states of Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania), whilst the second prong firmly pointed in the direction of countries ‘across the world’ which allegedly depend on the actions of the EU in order to ‘advance’ or ‘progress’ in the field of LGBTIQ rights. The establishment of an ‘LGBTIQ Freedom Zone’ by the EU can be read more as an attempt to make queerness ‘European,’... rather than embarking on the radical project of ‘queering’ the EU as a whole, which would require a radical questioning of its institutional, political and social architecture beyond heteronormativity, whiteness, Christianity, as well as ableism, among many factors” (2021).
3. It should be noted that while Kováts’s analysis of the strategic flipping of the “lagging behind” narratives in EEC is useful for our analysis here, in a different article she seems to espouse a TERF-adjacent rhetoric that seemingly questions the alleged

progressive naiveté of recognizing that there are more than two genders. She writes that “whatever we may think of non-binary gender identities, one thing is certain: there is no consensus about them in the progressive camp, let alone in society. And when progressives call the fact that humans exist – except few exceptions, the intersexuals – as male or female, a right-wing ideology, as often happens, it should come as no surprise to them that a gap opens up between their agendas and the people within the societies they seek to represent” (2019b). Her feminist analysis, while seemingly diametrically opposed to anti-gender movements, ends up scapegoating nonbinary genders as representing a discourse that has “moved too far” from the common people; thus, in this instance, she seems to rely on a more “civilized version” of much the same transphobia that structures those actors she critiques.

4. It should be noted that Ayoub, in his book *When States Come Out*, seems steeped in a vocabulary of visibility and rights as indicative of European-centered progress. Not only does he divide nations into “first movers/leading,” and “new adopters,” but he also reinforces a notion of Europe as the region that is the most “receptive to transnationalism and norm diffusion,” giving him a “considerable room for optimism” (206). The queer studies critiques of taking “norm diffusion” and the spread of LGBT rights as the prime indicator of queer progress are only briefly mentioned so as to be completely sidelined as beyond his scope. He writes: “many excellent studies in international relations and queer theory rightly question the normative content of the demands made by mainstream LGBT rights activists and critique the power dynamics and western essentialism inherent in some forms of transnational activism.

While I am sympathetic to such arguments ... a critical normative engagement of transnational LGBT activism falls outside the scope of this book. Instead, I observe that LGBT norms, *regardless of the quality of their content*, have spread to multiple domestic contexts” (18; emphasis mine).

5. This framing mimics what Browne and Nash describe as a reorientation of “sexual politics in the Global north towards ‘other places’ who have it ‘worse,’ because for LGBT people the world is ‘won’” (2020b, 33).
6. The government later clarified that they will also prioritize other minority religious groups, such as Yazidis and Ahmadiyya Muslims, but this seems mostly to have been a rhetorical move to obfuscate the obvious intent of privileging Christians. There was a lot of public outrage following the announcement, including discussions of whether the prioritization was even legal within international law.