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Queer Theory in Germany – Potentials, Questions, Critique

A paper presented on the workshop “Feminist Perspectives”, Free University Berlin, 26th-27th May 2005
by Katharina Pühl

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queer theory in Germany?

fem. theory; import from Anglo-American debates; queer and difference feminism; politics of sexuality; queer and gay/lesbian studies and politics

The debate about queer theory in Germany is by no means an easily reconstructable discourse in regard to its political, thematic and theoretical strands. Mostly imported from the Anglo-American context of gay-and-lesbian politics and theories, queer theory is a „travelling concept“ of critical perspectives in theory and gender politics. Additionally, its positioning between feminist queer critical perspectives and discourses of the gay-and-lesbian studies provokes questions like: Who is speaking in favour of whom? Which kind of politics of liberation, in epistemological as well as in political terms, is at stake?

As implicated by this workshop's scope of themes, I want to reconstruct some arguments from German queer debates not only with a focus to feminist politics, but as critical gender politics and gender theory more generally.

History

The term „queer“, which is a loan word of the 16th century from German, originally referred to the abasing, negating, dismissing, detesting and insulting labelling of mostly gay people and their politics of liberation in the US-context of sub-cultural politics by the mainstream of bourgeois white heterosexual male society. Later the concept was chosen and reverted as an ironic self-naming of gay people to fight the disdainful assaults of the heterosexual mainstream society. It became a reminder of its homophobic social background on one side and of gay-pride and political resistance of gay and lesbian people against this kind of discrimination on the other side.

In the beginning of the 1990s „queer“ was theoretically defined by Teresa de Lauretis (1991) as a new standpoint of critique within the field of feminist as well as gay and lesbian studies: She states that gay and lesbian studies describe clearly defined ways of life, sexuality, sexual practices, communities, themes, publications and discourses even in the sense of counter-identity. In contrast, she outlines the queer project as the critique of clear-cut identity politics of gay and lesbian theories. She claims that one should avoid definitions of who and what

is „lesbian“ or „gay“. Rather, one should abolish such discursive protocols and identity-loaded terms. She suggests resisting the discursive and ideological interpellation even found in the concept of counter identities. Instead, we ought to transgress or at least problematise these terms.

Theoretically, this argument reflects the growing influence of poststructuralist theories and their critique of identity and identity politics in critical theories of feminism and gay and lesbian studies. Politically a controversy arose at the crosspoint of different gay and lesbian as well as feminist perspectives concerning liberation and anti-discrimination: Is it about gay liberation or about the liberation of gays? Does it imply a universalising perspective and a concept of criticising heteronormative structures of society and their asymmetrical outcomes and hierarchies in terms of gender, homosexuality, and sexual practices? Or does it work in favour of diminishing the concepts of politics of liberation?

Background of this controversy were the political developments of antidiscrimination politics in the USA. They are contextualized in a paradox structure of a homophobic social gender order and discourses on behalf of equal civil rights of (not only) gay people. Struggles and claims for civil rights, for marriage, for non-discrimination, and a renewed law without special discrimination politics against gay and lesbian people were important. But in the process critical theorists and activists of queer studies learned to see the hidden structural dynamics of homophobia. Thus, juridical discourses and the law as well as processes of political participation and representation in liberal democracy became fields of queer intervention.

The inner logic of this argument of queer theory extended the space for new questions. Queer theories claim that gender identity and sexual practices do not coincide with one another: A certain gay, queer, lesbian or otherwise „deviant“ orientation is not only a question of adopting certain practices of sexuality or gender roles or a fixed position of gender identity. Some people even do not fit into one of these categories at all or do so only for some time of their live course. Deviant iden-



tities became a subversive position and a both theoretical and political standpoint to question the normative pressure and social force of gender identity in general and gay and lesbian and so called “genderly disordered identities” in particular. “Heteronormativity” emerged as a term of critique of sexual identity in general.

def. heteronormativity

Set of hidden rules, strategies, unconsciously as well as consciously practiced discrimination because of gender and sexuality; privileges heterosexuality as “normal”, “natural” way of sexuality; discriminates “deviant” sexualities and genders; conceptualises the “heterosexual couple” as a norm.

Social fields and practices of representation; aesthetic norms; body performances; ways of thinking.

Queer perspectives problematised the political orientation of gay and lesbian politics. Their orientation towards social and political recognition and full inclusion into liberal democracies and thereby implied “adaptability” of deviant identity positions within a “democratic” gender order were considered a naive standpoint. Its downside is the reductionist and complementary positioning of “deviant subjects” within a heteronormative structured political and symbolic order of society. Production and constitution of subjectivity are left out of political scrutiny in favour of a heteronormative exclusionary regime of representation of deviant identities. The un-representability of queer desire in a heteronormative social order was at stake.

The differentiation of theoretical positions has made the field of feminist, queer, gay and lesbian debate more complicated and controversial – throughout today. Whereas some people still take „queer theory” as synonym for gay and lesbian studies, others define „queer feminist” positions and thus a differentiated advanced feminist standpoint of critique. Still others see queer as an actually transgressive movement in politics and theory that strives for the abandonment of gender boundaries, gender identities and their roots in the binary gender order and heteronormativity in general. They try to develop more fluid and complex concepts of gender that comprise non-binary gendered social positions: The debates about transgender are an outcome of this dynamic.

In the German context, queer theory has so far not been a widespread academically institutionalized field of study and research. Only recently the first planned queer professorship was cancelled in Hamburg. Thus the working

field of queer theory remains within the gender and feminist studies (mainly literature; cultural studies and anthropology, art history, history, history of sexuality, psychoanalysis, social sciences). This marks the conditions of production of queer theory as often not fully accepted or having a minor status within the field of feminist theory. One can safely assume that queer theory is still about to enter more widespread debates on gender issues.

In our context I want to read queer perspectives as a

1. challenge for feminist and gender studies in the sense of theoretical enrichment of strategies to undo both binary gender categories and heteronormativity and as the

2. political raising of questions for feminist concepts of solidarity and alliances in the neoliberal frame of structural transformations of welfare state, hegemonial heterosexual gender order and capitalism. Thus I want to present some concepts from the German debate which deal with the conjunction of the symbolic gender order and the structural gender regimes in the capitalist welfare system.

Main concepts/Transfer of concepts

heteronormativity; de-normalization; de-centering on binary categories of sexuality and gender; economy of sexuality (symbolic and economical)

„Queer” does not represent a unifying category of critique nor is it a homogeneous field of theories, perspectives, strategies. The open character of the queer project has provoked – and continues to provoke – lively debates about the usefulness of its critique. **Brian Currid** for example argues that the context of development of „queer” in the USA can not be transferred to a German context because of different political structures, public and gender order, and sub-cultural and social movement-related issues. His argument is that queer should no longer be seen as an advanced gender anti-identity-strategy or essentialised as anti-identity concept. He states that the „dispositive of sexuality” (Foucault) in the US has changed extensively: The hegemonic male gay influence in media and public culture has bracketed sexuality in their discourses. This is a consequence of self-adaptation to hegemonic social discursive strategies of integrating formerly deviant identities into a broader social context of religious fundamentalism of



the US society. Certain „queer issues“ have been written out of the discourse at the cost of lesbian and other orientations of queer. Here, the question of a hegemony and of counterdiscourse arises.

Secondly and more important, Currid supports the thesis that „queer“ has been integrated in pluralised identity politics as part of popular culture in everyday life and consumerism. Insofar as „queer theory“ as a theoretical concept is well prepared to stress sexuality's historicity it needs to dissolve itself in its present form and to find new battle-lines in order to confront new forms of normativity in a changed theoretical and political shape: Certain identities of life forms and discrimination do not exist in the same way as in the 1970s and 1980s (some do). They have become part of consumerist culture and integration in a neoliberal pluralist market society: Activists and groups of mobilization have changed, and so have their interests, political interventions and positionalities. Currid fears the risk to essentialise even queer theory in the sense of an avant-garde concept opposite to identity politics of recognition and integration from the 1980s and 1990s. Self-critique and reflection are necessary for a new queer project facing these new conditions of politics.

In a certain sense, the work of *Antke Engel* is doing exactly that. Her interest focuses on a reflective proof of a rearranged order of discourse today as politics of sexuality in a neoliberal frame.

def. neoliberalism

Reorganisation and restructuring of financial politics, statehood, and (welfare) state arrangements mainly in Western and Northern countries since 20 years; due to rationale/rationality of market orientation.

Consequences: economy governs politics; economisation of social services, outsourcing of states responsibility for social subsistence at a minimum level to the market; redefinition of the common good; liberal frame of everybody's individual responsibility for social security; dominance of fiscal, financial economic politics over social policy, dominance of financial world over social needs.

She tries to outline theoretical concepts that reflect the political and epistemological challenges described above. One of her main questions is: How can we stand up for an open, but not simply „tolerant“ and pluralised strategy towards a non-binary gender order? How can we reflect the circumstance that critical sexual politics have been selec-

tively co-opted into the individualist frame of neoliberal societies? How can we avoid that the destabilising effects of queer critique do not simply fit into processes of neoliberal social transformation? What concepts allow to further transform binary heteronormative gender orders without stabilising structural exclusion through neoliberalism?

Her conceptual answer is given from the perspective of feminist-queer intervention. She pleads for both a reflective destabilisation and de-hierarchisation of categories and for the (untranslatable) concept of „Veruneindeutigung von Geschlecht und Sexualität“ (i.e. discursive and political and representational strategies to make sexuality and gender unclear beyond binary categories). This theoretical shift attempts to avoid the pitfalls of identity politics and the normalising normativity of gender and sexuality in a heterosexual frame. The normative and unifying use of the categories „men“ and „women“ declares differences within gender categories of secondary importance. Additionally, it legitimises sanctions, exclusions, or the threat of exclusion in cases of transgression of sexual or gender unambiguity. She states that these sanctions come to work not only in the more obvious cases of trans- and intersexuality, but also as normalising practices in everyday life (representation and visibility; body practices; work arrangements, etc.).

So the normative foundation of hetero- as well as homosexual relations of desire is based in a regime of normalisation of „two-gendered unambiguity“. Engel's argument shows that the difference between „normal“ and „not normal“ can be constituted only through a classificatory logic of gender unambiguity. The consequence of this critique is not to simply „undo“ binary gender categories in the sense of ignoring them, but to deconstruct their function in different contexts and hierarchised social structures.

Engel highlights the fact that neoliberalism forces processes of individualisation of subjectivity, thereby coercing individuals to take responsibility for their own lives. At this point, empowering feminist queer politics runs the risk to prove functional for a new pattern of social coercive integration: Not the fact to be a member of a certain social group matters, but rather social and economic integration sanctions individual capacity and usability of subjectivity, personality, and individual performance in a positive way. In neoliberalism, gender



more and more becomes a personal product, achievement, and outcome, which needs to be performed corresponding to criteria of success and individual economic power. Discrimination in turn is more and more discursively shaped as personal “bad luck”, not as outcome of social structural asymmetries.

Engel states that the discursive field and interpellation (Althusser) of queer identities today is changed and de-politicised. This forces us to deconstruct subtexts of discrimination as “flexible normalisation” in a pluralised, hierarchised, racialised and sexualised net of social interactions, institutions, and discourses. If not by gender discrimination, then by which criteria can solidarity be mobilised against neoliberal processes of individualisation? Engel’s answer is that we need to deconstruct the functional articulation of a rigid heterosexual normalisation regime with flexible normalisation. The paradoxical structure of different processes of gendering is part of the neoliberal matrix of capitalist societies in the North and West and forces us to invent new strategies of resistance beyond identity politics.

(Example) On a more concrete level, one of her suggestions is to redefine categories of participation in the context of citizenship rights and their implicit heterosexual normative order. Queer critique in this context criticises two political empowerment strategies as deficit:

1. Identity politics reinvent and re-inscribe a certain minority status to subjects as precondition for social and political inclusion (“women”; “homosexual” are seen as individual capacities, not as social position in a structured field of power relations).
2. An abstract category of citizenship denies material conditions of exclusion and non-participation of queer people who are confronted with a heteronormative social order. Engel’s answer is to provoke questions of heterosexual normality and to make the de-/privileging consequences part of the debate of full citizenship. Sexual citizenship then would be a concept which challenges the gender and sexual neutrality of citizenship concepts.

Queer politics? Politics of queer theory (drags, queens, and others)

homosexual marriage; cultural practices; representation; party politics; pink silver

One problem of queer theory is its often demanding fra-

me of theoretical and conceptual approaches that try to develop critical concepts of representation beyond heteronormative structures. The complexity of these academic debates is not easily transferable to politics and more practical activism. But in certain strands of queer movements in Germany both conceptual work and practical political activism are part of queer identities and political imaginations.

Examples

One initiative of young queer people in Germany tries to transgress the line between party and politics: pink silver. They invented a peaceful militant strategy when they organized walk-ins in private zones and consumerist places as queer pink cheerleaders. Passersby – and the police – were helpless and overwhelmed when a group of queer looking pink and silver nice young people danced into a shopping mall and shouted critical anti-capitalist statements. So practices of left wing activism were combined with queer sub-cultural forms of representation and party. In these contexts of activism, one can meet well-read people in queer theory who at the same time try to develop street-relevant practices to convert and irritate public political expectations beyond heteronormative representational politics.

On the other hand, the development of concepts of sexual citizenship requires expertise in law and lobby politics. The International Gay and Lesbian Association (ILGA) has developed a queered definition of sexual and gender discrimination and lobbied for its implementation into the European Constitution.

In Germany, the debate about homosexual marriage has provoked a lot of queer criticism of this state-related right of homosexual couples. Queer criticism questions this “normalising practice” as an integration politics approach based on the covert desire of homosexuals to become regular citizens of the German society with full social and political rights. Queer politics instead favour a debate about family forms, about having children in queer family contexts of choice instead of ones related to kinship and beyond heteronormative family ideals, etc.

I have mentioned only a few examples to show the broad field of queer intervention practices. I started out with the sceptical perspective of Brian Currid and the critical concept of Antke Engel, and will now try to



sketch the

usefulness of queer perspectives in my view

- Queer theory provokes questions about heteronormative foundations even of feminist theory and social sciences in their analyses of society. It shows the limitations of an two-gender only perspective. We can develop an enriched perspective of gender beyond heterosexual foundations of feminist critique, where “women” become “the other”.
- It helps the de-essentialising, de-construction of rationalities of biology, socialisation and cultural homogeneity as “tales of gender foundationalism”.
- Queer should be a flexible strategy of analyses and politics to fight heteronormativity and its hierarchising, exclusive effects in favour of processing gender beyond the lines of the binary gender order.
- Queer is not a fixed concept, nor is it a unifying critical paradigm. It rather is a bundle of theoretical strategies to overcome and rework the social costs of heteronormativity.
- Queer in this sense is not only about antidiscrimination politics or politics of recognition for certain groups of people who are discriminated in terms of gender identity, sexuality, and sexual orientation, but rather a strategy of irritation.

Missing links

- Queer theory so far struggles to analyse the intersecting lines of heterosexism, racism, and economic deprivileging. Theoretical perspectives should be broadened and connected in a comprehensive perspective for critical analyses of westernised, capitalist, and heterosexual culture and politics.
- Queer does not represent every positioning of gender and sexual difference (some people do not want to be part of “queer”: transgender, intersex people, a-sexuality etc.).
- Queer goes global? There are only few movements so far who try to intervene in struggles of resistance against globalisation from a queer perspective: “white” queer theory, racist biases, white privileges.

overarching perspectives?

Literature

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