

What's in a Name?

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This question is one of the most urgent questions in our literature, philosophy and politics. William Shakespeare sharply posed this question at the heart of “Romeo and Juliet”. Two young, idealistic lovers wish to transgress social rules, family traditions and the political context in which they lived. Naïve Juliet claims “That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.” Names are a problem with which many of us struggle. What does it mean that I am a man, that I am a gay or that I am Polish? We often find these names limiting and oppressive. We wish to be truly ourselves, beyond these names imposed on us. Romeo says: “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptis’d, Henceforth, I never will be Romeo”. Young lovers idealistically wish to abandon their names and their city; two things that limit them and mark their social positions. Shakespeare was not so idealistic, perhaps according to him roses don’t smell as sweet by any other name. It seems he deeply understood limitations of names. His lovers are not able to abandon their names and they die in their own city.

Weighty names

The meaning, importance and weight of names minorities feel particularly strongly. “Romeo and Juliet” in a sense seems to be uncannily queer drama as it highlights the struggle with names. This struggle in various forms is present throughout the history of sexual minorities on collective and

individual level. At some point of our lives we have to face the question: are we this name? Are we the name that we are called by others, often in derogatory and humiliating manner? Are we a name that is not the name of our fathers? Name connects us but also disconnects us. “Queer” definitely is one of such names that disconnects us from one community but this name offers us some alternative community. It is a name that supposed to serve as a mark of exclusion. “Queer” is a sign of expulsion but this sign was picked up by those whom it supposed to expel and turned into a powerful political tool.

It is a fascinating intellectual journey to investigate how “queer” from derogatory and humiliating term became a mark of a new identity, sensitivity, community, theory and a sign of a very new engagement with the social and political. I look at “queer” as a specific sign that gained various political meanings. In my analyses I do not assume that there is any common meaning of “queer”. Instead, I focus on variety of uses of this term. The contingency of the term is at the heart of my investigation.

“Queer” has been a term that since the end of 1980s and throughout the 1990s in the U.S. was central to many debates related to sexual minorities among activists and academics. From the U.S. this term fast travel to Europe and beyond becoming one of the key political terms of the recent decades.

Politics of names

Names are hardly ever neutral. In most of cases they confirm our place in a community or they expel us from this community, therefore names at their core are political. In my study I present the ways in which “queer” was politicized and I examine a variety of political meanings of this term. “Queer” functioned in multiple types of narrations; some of them were in contradiction to others. I analyse how certain activists and academics applied “queer” into political contexts or used this term in a political manner. I also look at politics that “queer” as a concept performs. This term was used in many internal debates among LGBT people. It served for them as a tool of critique of certain currents of LGBT politics or as a site of identification with a certain political ideals. There is no singular or even dominant way of using “queer”. Many people mobilised this term for various purposes and this is what makes it so interesting about “queer”.

Multiplicity of queer

My thesis is a study of multiplicity of uses of the term “queer” but also of ideas related to the uses of this term. The issue at stake here is how people engage in politics with the word “queer” and, following, how certain applications of this term become politically potent. On a more general level, through analyses of various uses of “queer”, I present a reflection on the politics of the very concept. The way the notion of “queer” functions in academic and non-academic discourses can be described as the politics of this concept because “queer” changes, challenges, displaces and relates in various ways to other existing concepts. The introduction of “queer” into political language is a redescription not only of the very concept but also of other political terms that are present in debates on sexual minorities. The texts that have used “queer” often pose a challenge to previous political discourses that were used to describe sexual minorities.

Queer language

“Queer” became a part of the political language that differed from debates concerning sexuality and gender that were dominant in the U.S. during the 1970s and during the 1980s. In this study I examine the evolution and flexibility of political language in which “queer” was engaged. “Queer” was used in relation to a specific understanding of politics but also in relation to particular topics and methodologies. For instance, the uses of “queer” in street performances, theatrical actions in public spaces, amusing advertisements and ironic pamphlets have brought into politics certain ludic element.

My study traces “queer” in its conceptual history as a political term that was initially deployed by AIDS activists and subsequently applied to academic texts. Academics and activists used “queer” to engage in debates on health care, representation of sexual minorities, citizenship, homophobic violence, race and class. I suggest that “queer” has been often deployed as a political term that challenges political language and even the meaning people give to politics itself.

Queer motives

I argue that although there are a whole variety of topics related to “queer”, there are some specific themes that reoccur when “queer” is used as a political signifier. “Negativity” is one of them, this term marks also a specific political stand. For many activists and academics “queer” was a call for a politics of withdrawal. I suggest that authors such as Michael Warner (1993) and Lee Edelman (2004) deploy “queer” as a sign of radical contestation. Through the concept of “queer”, they do not aim at engaging in reforming social institutions but rather at opposing any form of institutionalised politics. “Queer” functions for them as a sign of radical

negativity towards normative politics. Others, such as David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000) and Shane Phelan (2001) have attached “queer” to the theme of “citizenship”. My study shows that their political approach is to use the term “queer” to engage in reforming and redefining social institutions.

Applications of “queer” have been countless and occur in a wide variety of contexts. The term has become a sign of identity, political movements, protest, contestation of academic paradigms, an umbrella term for various marginalised identities and an umbrella term for various political claims, and in a certain way a utopian promise of a better future.

Between activism and academia

I focus on texts produced by activists of ACT UP and Queer Nation and academics such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam. I have selected the uses of “queer” that are to me the most powerful in their originality, influencing and challenging the current academic and political status quo. Perhaps in the future these connotations might be changed or even completely lost by very different uses of the term. Political terms constantly evolve when they are used in different circumstances and by different agents.

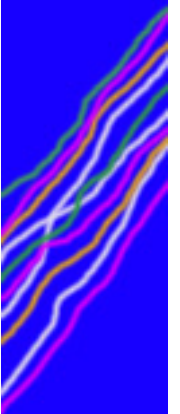
Queer Politics

There is no clear answer to which uses of “queer” are political and which are not. In my view, the political uses of “queer” make an intervention in academia, communities, society, politics and the lives of individual people. The authors that I have analysed in this thesis have clearly made an intervention on several of these levels.

At the heart of my thesis is the argument that the connection between “queer” and “politics” is highly productive. The texts in which “queer” functioned have brought to light several important issues that previously were rarely discussed among sexual minorities and in the mainstream of political debates. Among them were the question of the intersection of sexual orientation, gender expression, race and class; the conceptualisation not only of sexual identity but also of sexual practices; the critical conceptualization of rights and identity discourse; and finally the critical evaluation of political language that is used to discuss sexual minorities. I believe that in academic texts the most politically productive uses of “queer” are those that do not forget the activism that lies at the origin of this concept but at the same time engage in developing new forms of counter-hegemonic strategies that aim at transforming social reality. I am against utopian theories that as an answer to social problems propose an anarchic withdrawal from the social. I sustain that politically more efficient strategy than radical contestation is engagement in transformation of social institutions.

For many “queer” does not stand for positive political claims, but rather it functions as a counter-hegemonic sign as it has an ability to articulate various things and oppose static order both in political activism and in academic discourse. Generally, the term has not been used in discussions on LGBT rights. “Queer” instead connotes a specific politics of resistance. “Queer” functions in various ways and if there is something that is common between them it is perhaps the acknowledgement that people are different; people define themselves in various ways and engage in politics in multiple way. The use of the term “queer” suggests the flexibility of political language and of politics itself.

“Queer” is a concept that carries the painful history of exclusion, marginalization and the struggle of sexual minorities in the United States.



“Queer” has never been a neutral academic concept but it should be seen instead as an affective engagement with social and political reality. Moreover, it also marks a specific, I would argue, passionate engagement within the academic field.

Queer Future

Perhaps “queer” will remain the flexible term it was originally intended to be at the end of the 1980s, never fully owned by anyone who uses it, capable of alliances and always critical and radical. Another possible fate for queer is that it will disappear and other terms will speak more strongly to people’s political imagination and capture their energies and passions.

“Queer” is a concept that during the last decades has been constantly forged, invented, claimed, imagined and re-imagined. This project came from the fascination with the queer movement and queer theories but also from certain melancholia about political radicalism that is foreclosed to me. I see my own project on “queer” as a celebration of passion and as an engagement with people who as activists and academics use the term “queer” as their weapon to challenge and transform politics.

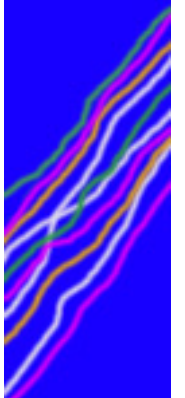
Jacek Kornak’s Ph.D. dissertation *Queer as a Political Concept* was publicly discussed on 4 February 2015 at the department of Gender studies, University of Helsinki. Opponent was doctor Matt Cook, Birkbeck, University of London, and Custodian was professor Tuija Pulkkinen, University of Helsinki.

Kornak’s dissertation is available in electronic form through the E-thesis service: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/152620>

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Lectio
Praecursoria



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