



Insider activists: The fraught possibilities of LGBT activism from within



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ABSTRACT

Legislative shifts in the first decade of the 21st Century altered the rights and protections for lesbians, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people in England in disparate and uneven ways that have yet to be fully investigated. This paper explores the possibilities and pitfalls for LGBT insider activists—LGBT people who undertake LGBT activism and work with/for state institutions (such as local government). Using interviews and other community engagements that were part of the Count Me In Too research, this paper explores the political activism of public sector workers in 'gay Brighton'. We find them placed at the interface of LGBT community based-activism and state sponsored work. This was productive for some, but also created a messy, and at times painful, between-ness for those on the front line. Rather than solely addressing these activists as assimilationist (which they sometimes are), conformist (which they undoubtedly are) or simple 'selling out', we critically consider activism from within institutions that support LGBT equalities agendas and the importance of space in creating these activism.

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1. Introduction

In 2010 the Equalities Act was enshrined into law in the UK with cross party support, so that sexual orientation and gender reassignment are now protected characteristics. The Equalities Act was the culmination of over ten years of legislative reform and supposed empowerment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) communities² that took place through this and other pivotal events such as the introduction of civil partnerships in 2005. These changes have significant implications for how we consider politics and political action in the 'World we Have Won' (Weeks, 2007).

Whilst there have been discussions of the normalisation arising from this form of legislation, as well as of its exclusions (Hines, 2007; McDermott, 2011; Puar, 2007a,b; Richardson, 2004, 2005; Stychin, 2003, 2005), the effects and implications of these legal advances on LGBT activism from within the state³ have yet to be

fully examined. We seek to add to work on the formation of sexual (and gendered) activism (for example Binnie, 2004a; Binnie and Klesse, 2011; Puar, 2007a,b), exploring locally based processes in Brighton, from the perspective of LGBT activists who worked⁴ within and with statutory services.⁵

In England, national level legislative and cultural drivers in the area of LGBT equalities have impacted the work of local government, statutory services and corporations (McNulty et al., 2010; Richardson and Monro, 2012). Previously, these focused on disrupting local government lesbian and gay equalities initiatives, classifying them within the 'looney left' and enacting legislation that sought to prohibit equalities initiatives (such as section 28 of the Local Government Act, Cooper, 1994, 2006). In contrast, at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, English local authorities and statutory/public services provided by the state were obliged by legislation to proactively cater for their local populations. This coincided with an expanded consideration of 'social

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² In working with participatory research we use the terminology used by participants, such as LGBT community, the council (Brighton & Hove City Council). We recognise that there is merit in deconstructing such discourses, however this is not the purpose of this paper.

³ We follow Painter's (2006) conceptualisation of the everyday state, seeing the state as manifest through its effects in everyday life. Understanding the state as manifest rather than pre-existing, the enactment of state actors, such as policies, legislation and so on is geographically uneven, and as such messy, and contingent. This enables us to focus on how 'the state' is produced, and the effects of this in specific places, which in turn challenges overarching narratives of working within and as the mainstream such that the possibilities of standing outside the state are brought into question (also Andrucki and Elder, 2007; Jessop, 1990).

⁴ The past tense is used for the data to reflect the political, economic, social and cultural shifts that have occurred since 2010 in the UK but are not the focus of this research. See Section 3 for a full discussion of the research.

⁵ In this context we understand statutory agencies as bodies whose role and remit is legally defined. We are particularly interested in the public sector agencies whose role is to deliver services as part of the welfare state to those who are understood as 'needing' state support, as well as those who commission such services. Over the period in question, there was in the UK, an emphasis in working with the third sector, including the voluntary and community sector. A full critique of these partnership working arrangements, and 'the community and voluntary sector' that was created through this, is beyond the scope of this paper (see Craig and Taylor, 2002). Suffice to note that certain LGBT groups were included in gay Brighton, as part of this grouping, and as we shall show resisted the ideals of partnership working in ways that question notions of co-option.

exclusion', moving from the sole remit of poverty and deprivation, to integration in a broader sense (Craig and Taylor, 2002). The push of legislative change, has in McNulty et al.'s (2010) research resulted in drivers of social change where LGBT work is embedded into some statutory contexts in the planning, procurement and delivery of public services (Cooper and Monro, 2003; Richardson and Monro, 2012). These have significantly impacted on the perceptions, attitudes and actions of LGBT activists. Much of what is recognisable in terms of the effects of social marginalisation comes under the remit of the state provision in England (housing, income, community cohesion, health). During the period in question this was administered through local government. Consequently, the enactment of equalities legislation through local public services is key to engaging with social difference in an English context.

In an era of LGBT equalities legislation examining how the state is manifest can enable activism from within institutions. These activism can contest, as well as reproduce, normativities. LGBT activism from within the state might be easily dismissed as a politics of recognition, one that stands in opposition to queer critical thinking (Browne, 2006; Oswin, 2008; Sears, 2005). Drawing on a conceptualisation of the state as diversely and unevenly performed (Painter, 2006; Andrucki and Elder, 2007) we explore the productivity of *doing* LGBT equalities at the level of local government, examining the messy complexities of putting legislation into practice. Discursive critiques of legislation and how it is brought about are important (see for example Bell and Binnie, 2000; Stychin, 2003), as are the marginalisations and new normalisations created by legislative equalities (see for example Duggan, 2002; McDermott, 2011; Warner, 2002). We seek to augment these discussions without negating the material and discursive forms of power that have real effects on everyday lives (Casey, 2007; Hines, 2007; Taylor, 2007, 2009). Instead of focusing on civil society, resistance movements or not for profit organisations (Andrucki and Elder, 2007; Brown, 2004), we explore LGBT activists who work for and with public sector services. Highlighting the nuanced negotiations that constitute activism within and in partnership with state organisations, we discuss those who cross between LGBT activism and state sponsored work, questioning the boundaries between these. We use the term 'insider activists' to name the positioning of individuals as within institutions, and simultaneously as activists. Insider activists are most obviously seen as LGBT activists who work for statutory services, however this description is based on state/non-state divides, and in an era of 'partnership working' these boundaries were blurred (Painter, 2006). Nonetheless, engagements that cross boundaries between them/us, inside/outside resulted in conflicts regarding the proper way in which LGBT agendas should be enacted. Whilst working within can be costly for community groups (Craig and Taylor, 2002; Fuller and Geddes, 2008; Newman and Clarke, 2009; Rumery, 2002; Tett, 2005), in Brighton LGBT activists could work inside (as well as with) statutory services. In this paper we argue that the boundaries that locate activism outside of state organisations were disrupted, questioning the 'them/us' divide. We show that this disruption can be costly for those who bridge arenas that are considered separate and have fraught shared histories and ongoing difficulties. We address local activism in Brighton that use place imaginings to push for the enactment of LGBT equalities legislation. Brighton's place-based imaginings as the gay capital and the assumption that there was a significant minority of the population that were LGBT, played an important role in creating LGBT activism in the city. LGBT people were included, as *LGBT people/representatives*, in local state processes such as policy-making and discussions of public service delivery.

We begin by critically discussing normalisation and deradicalisation associated with inclusion and equalities legislation. Following this we outline the context and methods for the paper.

We then explore the possibilities of insider activism in an era of LGBT equalities in gay Brighton and the possibilities of working with/as the state to address marginalisation and exclusion from key (potentially life-saving) public services. Rather than examining the constraints of legislation, we explore the ongoing tensions between public sector organisations and LGBT groups in Brighton, such that LGBT insider activists felt that they bridged the contested spaces between LGBT people, job roles and managers/directors. Reading this as a form of contested activism illustrates the (at times painful) interfaces of the separation that can be enforced between community/activism and the state. The negotiation of LGBT equalities with and within state institutions emphasises the complexities of activism that can be simultaneously complicit and resistant (Rayside, 1998) in spatially nuanced ways.

2. Deradicalisation and activism

Changes in legislation and culture that have enshrined civil rights and moved away from the prosecution, demonisation and state sponsored violence have, without doubt, been welcomed (Weeks, 2007). The changes in possibilities and practices of partnership working have meant that certain oppositional groups that would formerly have opposed the state using traditional templates of activism, are now abandoning this approach to participate as 'legitimate experts in policy discourses' (Grundy and Smith, 2007, p. 298; Cooper and Monro, 2003). However, there has also been increasing scepticism regarding these new inclusions and resulting politics. Discussion around homonormativity highlights the exclusions in legislation, along lines such as class and race, pointing to the intersectionalities of gender and sexual lives (see for example Erel et al., 2011; Haritaworn, 2008; McDermott, 2011; Monro, 2010; Taylor et al., 2011; Taylor, 2009). Queer critiques illustrate the recuperation of gay lives where sexual politics no longer question normative exploitative institutions (Duggan, 2002; Richardson, 2004, 2005; Warner, 2002). Writing from an American perspective, Sears (2005) that:

This demobilisation leaves many queers out in the cold. The consolidation of lesbian and gay civil rights has tended to benefit some more than others. Those who have gained the most are people living in committed couple relationships with good incomes and jobs, most often white and especially men (Sears, 2005, p. 93).

Some (radical, queer and other) activists/scholars assert that working with/for the state forces complicity, compliance and co-option (for example Fuller and Geddes, 2008). Sears (2005) contends that because attaining civil rights meets the goals of many lesbians and gay men, there is a depoliticisation of certain forms of sexual politics, and that sexual emancipation has yet to be achieved. Brown (2007) purports that one queer groups activism 'rearticulates a politics of sexual liberation rather than equal rights' (2685–2686). This form of politics was not limited to sexual and gender politics, and instead offered 'an anti-capitalist perspective to queer activism and a queer edge to the anti capitalist movement' (2690). Whilst Binnie (2004a) sees queer activism as asserting a 'moral authority that stands in opposition to the scene' (p. 58), there has also been a juxtaposing of LGBT equalities gains and queer critiques/activisms.

Other authors have sought a nuanced approach, 'recognising the hegemony of capitalist power relations while attending to the always contingent nature of these relations' (Andrucki and Elder, 2007, p. 90), as well as questioning that recent equalities changes

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