



KEYWORDS

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REVIEW

Eleftheriadis, Konstantinos. *Queer Festivals: Challenging Collective Identities in a Transnational Europe*. Protest and Social Movements series. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. 215 pp. € 99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-94-6298-2741.

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In this well-documented book, based on in-depth fieldwork conducted from 2011 to 2013 in Amsterdam, Berlin, Copenhagen, Oslo, and Rome, sociologist Konstantinos Eleftheriadis explores the paradoxical identity work of queer festivals in western Europe. The main research questions Eleftheriadis addresses revolve around the multiple ways festival organizers and participants construct and deploy an anti-identitarian queer identity. Since the 1990s, queer theory's project of deconstructing identities has indeed not always translated into actual, embodied forms of similarly queer identification in social movement fields. Movements that proclaim themselves queer have not always been able to deliver on the promise of undoing sex-, gender-, and sexuality-based identities, an effect of the "identity dilemma" that a wealth of social movement sociological scholarship has examined. And the tension between deconstructionist, anti-identitarian queer theory and de facto identitarian queer mobilizations has been the basis for several important sociological critiques of queer theory's textualism and its relative lack of heuristic value when it comes to understanding social experiences and collective mobilizations. Eleftheriadis's study is thus a welcome contribution to a more recent body of sociological scholarship that seeks to take queer theory seriously without dismissing its critiques or neglecting the empirical reality of social experience and collective behavior.

The originality of Eleftheriadis's contribution is to do that by focusing on collective mobilizations that do not address policy-change claims to governmental authorities but instead have a more pronounced symbolical and experiential focus. And again, far from dismissing queer festivals as less politically significant for lack of a clearly defined, identifiably political agenda, Eleftheriadis usefully hypothesizes that they pose a crucial challenge to both sex-, gender-, and sexuality-based social movements and social movement sociology. The book follows in the footsteps of a solid body of scholarship that examines identity work in social movements, but the author also introduces a focus on the construction of publics and counterpublics. A further important contribution of the book is its attentiveness to both the necessary distinction and the various connections between discourses and practices.

The book comprises seven chapters and two appendixes. It opens with a substantial introductory chapter that presents the queer movement's anti-identitarian agenda as a process of autonomization from the increasingly institutionalized LGBT movements in western Europe. Eleftheriadis indeed argues that western European and North American queer mobilizations differ in that the former are much more fundamentally indebted to the circulation of queer theory in academic circles but also—perhaps even more significantly—much more closely linked to left-wing transnational movements, such as the spate of mobilizations that emerged in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011, from the Indignados to Occupy, and the various successive European

social forums. Eleftheriadis thus convincingly justifies the usefulness of studying queer festivals, in order to decenter the sociological perspective away from the state, especially in western Europe, where they effectively enact transnational anti-identitarianism. Thus, he argues, queer festivals *are* contentious arenas that cannot dispense with identity work but do so through prefigurativeness, in other words, a set of discourses and practices that create and enact the social worlds to which their participants aspire.

The second chapter, “The Origins of Queer Festivals in Europe,” begins with the emergence of queer theory in American academia, its relation with American social movements of the last two decades of the twentieth century, and the scholarly debates it triggered in the United States. By contrast, European queer festivals emerged from the intrusion of queer theory into the transnational global justice movement, leading to a queer desire to challenge heteronormativity within this movement as well as a transnational desire to challenge the institutionalization of the European LGBT movement. While the anarchist-inspired festival Queeruption was an exemplar of this process in the 2000s, the next generation of queer festivals was less explicitly linked with the claims of the global justice movement but no less indebted to its publics and resource infrastructures. In this chapter, Eleftheriadis begins to sketch out the contours of what queer festival participants do in terms of hands-on practices that perform identity work—from debates to demonstrations, drag performances, bike-repair workshops, and collective cooking. He also introduces one of the built-in biases of queer festivals, that is, the discrepancy between their participants’ subordinate social position in terms of sexuality and the privileged social positions a majority of them occupy in terms of economic and cultural capital.

The third chapter, “Organizing the Queer Space,” draws even more intensely from Eleftheriadis’s field notes and interview material to explore the concrete meaning of the horizontality and do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos queer festivals seek to promote, thus expounding the author’s view that organizational processes—including where and how a festival is organized—are part of its identity work, the focus being on prefigurativeness in action. Two findings are somewhat underemphasized here. First, queer festivals’ behavioral experimentations are temporary. Readers are left pondering the meaning of such temporariness, however: might it not be considered a plus, in that it makes experimentations less committal for participants, hence possibly encouraging them to engage in them? Second, queer festivals, in their deliberative organization and affective communication, do not “overtly perform marginalization from the rest of society, as we see in countercultures” (p. 55). It might be beneficial to further explore how this difference from countercultures meshes with queer festivals’ proclaimed anti-state autonomous inspiration. The chapter is based on a theoretical opposition between “the Habermassian model of deliberative democracy”—which enhances festivals’ role as ideal places of prefiguration—and “the Gramscian emphasis on counter-hegemonic struggle”—which puts a premium on strategy—with Eleftheriadis concluding that in queer festivals the two largely overlap (p. 56). Field observations show that festivals are strategic in their use of preexisting infrastructures—for example, squats—and their promotion of an ideological queer agenda, but the author’s data also emphasize emotional motivation, sometimes purely for socialization’s sake, where participation is a gratification in itself. Eleftheriadis here usefully situates queer festivals both in their punk and feminist legacies, and points out such issues as the legacy of heterosexism in squat culture or the fact that horizontality is often a prospect rather than a fully achieved goal, so that the

boundary between organizers and participants is never fully lifted and the DIY ethos is always a work in progress.

Chapter 4, "What Is 'Queer' about Queer Festivals?," presents European queer festivals as indebted both to aspects of American queer theory, such as the destabilization of identities, and to their embeddedness in the European Marxist tradition within gay liberation and feminism. The primary material here draws largely from the festivals' own presentation on their websites, where Eleftheriadis identifies the link between theory and activism in the way each festival creates its public by delineating its own identity boundaries. The discursive and pictorial critique of homonormativity developed in festivals' callouts and videos also evinces their lack of active race-affirmative politics, and—as in actual festival debates and workshops—their heavy reliance on abstract theoretical language in itself creates differential understandings of queerness depending on participants' degree of academic achievement. This limit in queer festivals' inclusiveness—despite affirmative efforts not to let financial resources be an obstacle to participation (for example, financial and material support is offered)—is in tune with the fact that their critique of capitalism is essentially contingent on organizers' practical choices rather than a defining feature of their *raison d'être*. One unanswered question in this chapter is, where does queer festivals' money come from? Closer analysis of their economic model of funding and sponsorship might have either reinforced or mitigated the sense that they are not structurally anti-capitalist.

Chapter 5, "Not Yet Queer Enough," revisits the limitations identified in the previous two chapters in light of the tensions and connections between discourses and practices. By confronting the Bourdieusian concepts of habitus and social capital with the late performance and queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification, Eleftheriadis both confirms the existence of internal hierarchies in queer festivals, despite their egalitarian discourse of horizontality, and shows how participants resort to disidentification as a way to "negotiat[e] their identifications, according to their own habitus" and thus affirm their agency (p. 101). Parodic performances, for example, are examined as artistic expressions that cathartically enable the affirmation of an alternative queer politics in festivals. Through such examples as the SlutWalk and the performances of Bibliotheque Erotique at the Da Mieli a Queer festival in Rome or the workshops at Queeristan in Amsterdam and the Copenhagen Queer Festival, Eleftheriadis confronts the internal and external effects of embodied practices of queerness. From expressing dissent within festivals' internal spaces of deliberation to opening up an expression of undetermined queer identities in external public space, the chapter shows both the limits in festivals' achievement of inclusiveness and their success in enabling participants to quite literally embody queerness. Yet, while theoretical queer talk can be exclusionary, that is never definitive since festivals also provide internal spaces of contention, as Eleftheriadis shows with the debates on the place and practice of veganism, for example. Finally, the study of the variety in dress styles shows how diversified expressions of queerness can be: rather than a somewhat oxymoronic "queer norm," what is put into practice here is a form of bricolage that allows participants to explore various facets of their queer subjectivities—confirming Eleftheriadis's hypothesis that festivals are *undetermined* fields of oppositionality. With its focus on practices, embodiment, and bricolage, chapter 5 is probably the one that will garner the most attention from readers with an interest in festive studies.

The sixth, final chapter, “Queering Transnationalism,” crystallizes a lot of issues in queer festivals’ anti-identitarian identity work, as their opposition to nation-states matches their autonomization from the mainstream LGBT movement—LGBT movements in Europe having relied heavily on nation-based organizations within the European Union and worked quasi-symbiotically with them in promoting a “gay-friendly” image of European institutions and identity. Queer festivals, by contrast, operate from a queer of color and women of color critique that holds national as well as sexual and gender identity boundaries to be sources of undesirable hierarchies. Queer festivals thus offer an opportunity to study transnationalism in social movements in a way that is not limited to how a given movement “address[es] another state or an international organization” (p. 146). Rather than a mere question of cross-border diffusion that essentially leaves intact national boundaries, Eleftheriadis argues, queer festivals enable us to think of how these boundaries can actually be transcended. Here again, a focus on practices allows Eleftheriadis to bring to light effective processes of transnationalization. These include multilingualism, the diverse makeup of organizing committees, and the cross-border circulation of know-how and expertise. English is de facto the lingua franca of transnational queer identity work, which has its own built-in biases in terms of economic and cultural capital, but a conscientious effort is made to try and counteract them, for example, through community translation. Likewise, far from contradicting queer festivals’ transnational agenda, individuals cross national borders to join an organizing committee out of a mix of political and affective engagement—showing how enmeshed the two are: this analytical thread runs throughout the book and is likely to be of interest to readers with a festive studies background or sensitivity. For here also, it is through hands-on practices, such as skills sharing, that transnationalism—arguably one of queer festivals’ strongest achievements—is performed.

In this book, Eleftheriadis explores a conspicuously understudied object that proves of high scholarly interest. Among the many merits of the study are its pragmatic, inductive ethnography and its methodological and theoretical litheness: Eleftheriadis makes a strong theoretical contribution by confronting the existing literature to his data and refraining from any form of theoretical or methodological dogmatism. For example, he does not compare for the sake of comparativism: “a strictly comparative perspective would imply an external point of view that would oblige [him] to build comparable objects and similar analytical questions that would equally apply to all festivals” (p. 169). As this is simply not the case, he chooses instead to let the field speak. Similarly, the study displays a keen awareness of social, economic, and cultural positionality and determinisms, while being truly attentive to social actors’ subjectivity, practices, and bricolage—a convincing example of the usefulness of theoretical catholicity. Especially laudable is Eleftheriadis’s commitment to take his protagonists’ identity work seriously. Anti-identitarianism, while not always fully achieved, is never treated as just a discursive tactic or posture but as an expression of queer festival organizers and participants’ dedication to autonomous activism. The author makes no secret of his political sympathies with the object of his study, and the book’s reflexivity is one of its merits: not only is Eleftheriadis honest about his own positionality, but he also weaves it into the fabric of his scientific argument. If anything, readers might want to know more precisely to what extent his ethnography pertains to participant observation or observant participation: the methodological appendix is detailed about Eleftheriadis’s multi-sited ethnography but less so about precisely what role he played in each festival. The book could perhaps have given more details earlier on as to what exactly

goes on in a queer festival. For example, Eleftheriadis aptly documents the experience of sexual flexibility reported by several respondents; yet sex parties are mentioned but not analyzed per se, although they could have provided useful insights as to how queerness is embodied in relation to the expression of sexuality—a rather crucial issue if one thinks of how the mainstream LGBT movement has pursued political acceptability and legitimacy in part by downplaying sexuality.

Among the many merits of this rich study is also its great readability, including to nonspecialists of social movement sociology, queer theory, or gender and sexuality studies. For example, these readers will find most useful the additional information on scholarly literature provided in footnotes. In addition, each chapter dispenses a substantial dose of theoretical discussion that is always confronted with the data, so that Eleftheriadis never presents his theoretical positioning in an empirical vacuum. In short, Eleftheriadis's *Queer Festivals* provides an innovative perspective on the realities of the oft-evoked yet insufficiently known queer movement, which is too frequently conflated with queer theory—while “queer” increasingly tends to be loosely applied to characterize any LGBT movements and festivals. One of the book's theoretical ambitions is indeed to clarify the link between queer festivals and queer theory. This goal is successfully reached, as is that of accounting for the interplay between discourses and practices in the formation of a festival's publics and the performance of its identity work.

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Guillaume Marche is a professor of American studies at the University of Paris-Est Creteil (France). His publications deal with contemporary social movements in the United States, mainly the LGBTQ movement. His research focuses on sexual identities, subjectivity, and the interplay between the cultural and political dimensions of collective mobilization. His recent research also addresses infrapolitical forms of intervention in public spaces in San Francisco—for example, graffiti, murals, urban greening, LGBTQ theatricality, and public nudity—and the use of biographies and memoirs of militancy in social movement sociology. He is the author of *Sexuality, Subjectivity, and LGBTQ Militancy in the United States* (Amsterdam University Press, 2019) and the director of the research working group IMAGER (Institute for the study of English-, German-, and Romance language-speaking spheres) at the University of Paris-Est Creteil.

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