

Summary

Passionate Politics: Resistance to Heteronormative Gender Power

In this study I analyse resistance to dominating norms concerning gender and sexuality among young left-wing political activists on the left in Gothenburg. My assumption here is that in this group, feminist questions are prioritized and that this should lead to intense efforts to change gendered and sexualized norms and practices, facilitating studying the relationship between power, resistance and the possibilities to change social structures. Resistance to dominating norms give rise to new norms, which I call counter-norms. I am interested in how these activists handle contradictory and competing discourses and how this impacts on the strategies they use. They have high and well-articulated ideals which sometimes collide with their feelings and practices. How do they handle all these contradictions and different demands? One important point of departure is that resistance and power are intertwined. Resistance is the other side of power – and vice versa. Besides, a practice can be associated with both change and social reproduction at the same time. My idea is that the analysis of the resistance practices will make visible the simultaneous production of change and stability and the dynamic play between them. As a result of this, the power structure is also made visible. Through resistance, power crystallizes.

I have called the thesis *Passionate Politics* because my material shows that the distinction between emotions and rationality is not so clear-cut.

This is obvious when it comes to the passion with which the activists strive to reorganize their lives. The political ideals demand both great emotional investments and a passionate disciplining of the self. Passion is also part of the emotional bonds between the members of the collective and of the dramaturgy of the resistance practices. Finally, the political driving force consists to a great extent of passion. According to Chantal Mouffe passions are one of the strongest motive forces in the field of politics.

Part I: Introduction

Part One consists of three chapters: (i) background, aim of the study and research questions, (ii) theoretical perspectives and (iii) method/methodological discussion. *In Chapter One* I give a background to the study and introduce the *overall purpose* of the thesis, which is to analyse resistance to heteronormative gender power to be able to say something more general about the possibilities and the limits of this resistance. The *research questions* are: Which possibilities and limits for resistance against heteronormative gender power can be distinguished in the activists' speech? Which ambivalences are there in the resistance strategies that are used by the activists? Which new norms are produced in the alternatives that are created through the resistance? Which are the contradictions between ideal and practice and how are these handled by the activists? What kind of understanding of the politics are implicated by the resistance strategies used?

Chapter Two focuses on my theoretical perspectives, which mainly emanate from Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Diane Macdonell and Chantal Mouffe – and others influenced by them. The primary theoretical source is thus poststructuralist feminism, queer theory and foucauldian inspired theories of power and resistance. Another point of departure is that I make the assumption that we live in a society based on heteronormative gender power, where women and femininity are subordinated in relation to men and masculinity. This has to be put together with an intersectional perspective and the foucauldian way of understanding power – as something moving, changing and as existing everywhere, and in ways that are not always obvious to us. This means that power rela-

tions are not as static as they seem to be when you adopt a gender power perspective. A man can simultaneously be positioned as gay or working class, which effects his position in the web of power relations and the possibilities and limitations of his life. One of my argument focuses upon the importance of analysing sexuality and gender as intertwined and produced simultaneously, or in other words, as intersectional. Subjectivation, the process by which individuals become subjects and at the same time are subjugated to heteronormative gender power, is central in my analysis and I search for different resistance strategies to this process. According to Diane Macdonell there are three different responses to subjectivation/interpellation: i) identification – as a good subject one agrees to the interpellation; ii) counter-identification – one is a "troublemaker" and "answers back", which is a response that is symmetrical with and depending on the interpellation; and iii) disidentification – one works on and against a dominant ideology from an antagonistic position, which can lead to a transformation of the dominant ideology. It is anti-assimilationist. Here, Johanna Oksala's foucauldian inspired concept "limit experience" is presented as a tool for analysing the challenges made by the activists on the boundaries between different identity categories and between the normal/intelligible and the abnormal/unintelligible. "Limit experience" involves performing the unpredicted and the "unlivable"/unintelligible – and sometimes that which is deemed to be wrong, filthy, on the outside; the abject. From the discussion concerning abject and abjection, by Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler and Sara Edenheim, I propose the verb "abjectifying", as a way to point out the significance of *actively* using the abject/abjection as a resistance strategy. In this chapter I also discuss the construction of collective identities and argue in line with Judith Butler for a wider understanding of the "we", where "being beside oneself" as a consequence of sexual passion, emotional distress or political rage is included. Collective identities are not homogenous, but constantly under renegotiation.

In Chapter Three I discuss my methodological point of departure and choice of methods. The discourse analysis I pursue is inspired by Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. I analyse central concepts in the activists' speech. Both the explicit, implicit and symbolic meanings are significant in the analysis. I regard speech as discursively regulated. In a discourse,

some speech acts and practices are possible and even commanded, and some are forbidden or not intelligible. Discourses and their effects are very material, and people who challenge the dominating norms and discourses are very aware of the power the discourses have over our bodies and thoughts. Discourse analysis, with deconstruction as an important tool, can be a good way of creating necessary theoretical distance to the data. I discuss my own position and knowledge production by arguing for “situated knowledge”, a concept emanating from the work of Donna Haraway. “Situated knowledge” means leaving the supposed neutral objectivity behind and instead seeing the particularism and the embodiment of knowledge as necessary for a stronger objectivity. Sometimes it includes placing oneself in a subaltern, subjugated perspective to get another view from where to produce knowledge. Non-localized knowledge claims are according to this irresponsible.

My empirical material consists of interviews and focus groups with 32 political leftist activists in Gothenburg and a focus group with four women who have been activists since the 1960s and 70s. The young activists age between 19 and 31, with most in their mid-twenties. They are part of what Håkan Thörn calls a “movement culture” where shared values and norms are important. Even though they are part of the same movement culture, they participate in many different groups, with for example a feminist, queer, anarchist, socialist, anti-racist, animal rights or anti-fascist agenda. I consider these activists and the movement culture as a *case* where the resistance to heteronormative gender power is explicit and intense, and therefore a good example of a context from which it is possible to analyse the possibilities and limitations of resistance. Like Michel Wieviorka I see a case as “casing”, which means that the demarcation of the case is process, a result of interaction between theory and empirical data.

Part II: Positions

In this part of the thesis I analyse how the activists on the one side use different subject positions, for example the subject position “woman”, as tools for their resistance, and on the other side, how they by deconstructing and transgressing boundaries between categories and subject

positions try to eliminate them. *Chapter Four* is about gender positions, and focuses upon the following resistance strategies used by the activists: humanization, counter-identification, disidentification and "feminist standpointng". Using disidentification as a strategy, some of the activists perform resistance from an abject; i.e. rejected position. It is not a matter of claiming respectability "in spite of" this abjected position, like the gay movement use to do. Rather, it is to *use* the very rejection/abjection in order to destabilize the gender order. Sometimes they talk about recognizing the abjected, and sometimes they claim a very ambivalent position, which is built upon the logic of "both/and" or "neither/nor". I have called this "abjectifying" – a verb which indicates activity. An example of this is that some of the activists in my interviews identify themselves as intergendered, i.e. both woman and man, or neither woman nor man. *Chapter Five to Seven* concern sexual positions like hetero- homo and bisexuality.

Chapter Five analyses the resistance of heterosexually identified activists to heteronormativity. Some of them pose the question: is it possible to be both feminist and heterosexual? If they combine heterosexuality with something anti-normative – and of course criticize heteronormativity – it may pass. Ambivalence concerning dialogue and conflict is obvious in this chapter, something I have related to the Swedish gender equality discourse and the gender power discourse.

Chapter Six concerns the strong politicizing of the lesbian position in the movement culture; partly by lesbians themselves, but even more by people that identify themselves as hetero- or bisexual. Separatism is often used as a strategy among some of the lesbian activists and many non-lesbian activists talk about this in negative terms as they feel excluded and not accepted. Besides, they describe what they call "the political lesbians" as ascetic and very self-disciplining. The lesbians themselves talk about their group in positive terms; emphasizing the intimate friendship, the closeness and the empowering they get from each other. In my analysis I point out that discipline and strong feelings/passion very well can work together.

Chapter Seven concerns the gay men and their anti-assimilationist strategies. In the movement culture the position of the gay man is depoliticized, since being a gay man is not seen as political in itself because

he is not oppressed as a man. The gay men in my data however talk of themselves in very political terms. They use "the filth as a weapon", which means that they want to eliminate the pure – meaning the normative, bourgeoisie and assimilated – by recognizing and highlighting the filthy, criminal and awful that during a long time has been attached to homosexuality. I point out that by eliminating purity they also eliminate the filth, because the two are mutually depending on each other, and here the talk produces an ambivalence: they perform resistance to the boundary lines between purity and impurity and at the same time they use the very same as a tool for resistance.

In *Chapter Eight* I analyse talk about the bisexual position. Many of the interviewed consider the bisexual position to be ideal because it is not excluding "half of humanity" – like the hetero- and homosexual positions are supposed to do. At the same time bisexuals are treated like they are not authentic in their feelings and bisexual women are delegitimized as feminists because of their relations with men. As a matter of fact, many of the women that identify themselves as bisexuals, only or almost only have intimate relations with men. Even bisexuals use different kinds of delegitimizing practices towards themselves. Two persons identify themselves as poly- or pansexual, which means that they go beyond the bisexual position and argue that even bisexuality reinforces the binary gender model, as you are attracted to *both* women and men.

Part III: Practices

In the third part I analyse talk about practices related to gender and sexuality; clothes, hair and other attributes, transgressing the self, struggles for the right to space in the movement, sexual practices and finally practices around love relations, family building and housing. *Chapter Nine* analyses the activists' strategic use of clothes, hairstyle and other visible attributes. This strategy has several functions; it is an act of resistance towards dominating gendered and sexualized norms and it is also a way of constructing a collective, a "we". Examples are dreadlocks, a bohemian "second hand-look", men in skirts, women with hairy legs and drag kings. Heterosexual men's transgressing of gender limits goes no further than to the point where they risk being seen as gay men. It seems important to

not "over-communicate" femininity or "under-communicate" masculinity. If a man has what I have called "hetero protection", he can experiment and play quite freely with his gender. "Hetero protection" means that he has, or believes he has, a strong protection against harassments due to homophobia, which is depending mainly on how he is performing his gender and partly on how he identifies sexually. This explains why gay men who look "masculine enough" can avoid homophobic harassment and why heterosexual men who look "too feminine" can suffer from homophobia.

In *Chapter Ten* I analyse resistance manifested as projects for changing the self, by which I mean the activists' personality, the interests they have and what they like or dislike. The focus is on transgressing their own limits and it demands a huge amount of self-reflexivity and self-disciplining. Through the combinations of traditional femininity and masculinity, the gendered structure is destabilized, but they often operate within the binary gender model, which at the same time reinforces it. An example of this is a man who tries to be more feminine; i.e. in this culture more gender progressive, by starting to sew, which is seen as a traditional feminine activity. He is doing "the opposite". This is an example of how the very same act both changes, and reproduces, the order. The sewing is still seen as something feminine.

Chapter Eleven concerns the struggle for space as well as experiences of sexism within the movement. The women interviewed try to take more space; with their bodies, their voices and concerning how much of the time and space they demand. The men try to give more space to the women and are considered to be better feminist men, than men outside the movement. They talk about their incapability of giving women enough space in a confession-like tone. Some of the women, in the part of the movement where the question of class dominates, describe an "initiation rite" which often includes sex – when it concerns women. They talk about being "fucked in" and "fucked out".

In *Chapter Twelve* I analyse different arenas for sexual practices: the "traditional model", penetration, negotiations concerning contraceptives, "equality sex", ambivalent resistance to pornography and finally sado-masochistic and fetisch practices. Heterosexual men talk much more in detail about sexual acts than heterosexual women, gay men and

lesbians. I claim that this is due to several different factors. One is that it is the masculinity that is under common scrutiny, and another is that the new position for men – giving pleasure to women – poses them as secondary, which could lead to a need to talk more. Even though they are “secondary”, the activists of both gender give the male ejaculation/orgasm primacy in the sexual act. Besides, the position as “pleasure giver” is still the active one. Even though many of the interviewed say that penetration ought not to be central, penetrative sex still dominates and is considered to be the one thing that completes the sexual act. Among activists identified as heterosexual, “gender equality sex” is mainly viewed as something positive and desirable, but the gay men are very critical of this concept. They argue that it implicates a sweet and puritan way of having sex and in their talk I find connections to critique of the gender equality discourse – as an exclusionary assimilationist discourse. When it comes to pornography, they are critical towards traditional pornography, but some of them – heterosexual men and some bisexual women – find ways to legitimate their own consumption of pornography. It is considered legitimate if it is home-produced, not paid-for or in the form of cartoons. S/M- and fetisch practices are not a wide-spread practice in my data, but since it can be viewed as a parody where norms are made visible and sometimes transgressed, it *can* be defined as resistance. The part about contraceptives shows that sexuality still is bound to biological reproduction and is not as plastic as Anthony Giddens claims. Further, it reveals that the negotiations are about the women’s bodies and that these bodies often are sacrificed.

Chapter Thirteen is about love relations, families and housing alternatives. The discrepancy between ideal and practice is obvious here. Some activists are critical towards monogamy, but they seldom manage to have so-called open relations. Many of them have lived, live or want to live in collectives as a part of their critique against the heteronormative nuclear family model. One point made in this chapter is that feelings are considered harder to change than for example sexuality or identity, no matter how socially constructed they are considered to be.

Part IV: Conclusion

This part consists of *Chapter Fourteen*, the conclusion. Through pointing at and analysing central ambivalences in my data I answer my research questions. Those ambivalences are: (i) subject positions/practices, (ii) intelligibilities/unintelligibilities, (iii) resistance to norms/norms of resistance, (iv) constructions/essences and (v) gender equality/gender power. Opposing discourses struggle to win superiority and one way to handle the conflicts that emanate from this, is to carry "both-and" or "neither-nor". By this, contradictions are transformed into ambivalences. Among the activists this is a resistance strategy, which means that they actively *use* or *produce* the ambivalences as part of their resistance. The ambivalences show the double movement between change and reproduction which in its turn makes visible both possibilities and limits for resistance. Besides, it gives a more nuanced picture of the activists and the movement culture. To be clear; I understand ambivalences in two ways; as an experience of contradictory discourses and as a tool for resistance.

(i) The ambivalence "subject positions/practices" consists of how the activists on the one hand use the subject positions as tools for resistance – for example the subject position "woman" when they enact women's lib – and on the other hand, deconstruct the very same subject position – for example when they identify themselves as intergendered. Using a subject position means that they risk reproducing it, and deconstructing it means that they risk making gender power invisible and thus destabilizing the very foundation of feminist struggle. One way of using this ambivalence is what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines as "strategic essentialism". This means using the subject position strategically and temporarily for a specific purpose – and then leaving it. (ii) The ambivalence-intelligibilities/unintelligibilities is about how the activists, on the one hand want to eliminate the boundaries between the intelligible/normal and the unintelligible/abnormal, and on the other hand use the same limit and the unintelligible as a tool for resistance. The best example here is the intergendered persons and the gay men's use of "the filth as weapon" which I have described above. (iii) The next ambivalence consists of, on the one hand, the antinormative attitude, and on the other hand the production of new norms, so called counternorms or norms of resistance, which also

means new exclusions and inclusions. In my view, this is one of the reasons why new identifications and new language practices are constantly produced. They don't want to get stuck in either norms or subject positions, so they have to transgress the limits for them over and over again. Even breaking the movement's counternorms can be appreciated, since it is a sign of creativity and antinormativity. It is important, however, to observe that it is always some of the counternorms that are accepted – and some that are not. (iv) The ambivalence constructions/essences describes how the activists on the one hand legitimate and use a constructivist way of thinking, and on the other hand use arguments based on essentialism to explain their own shortcomings. The body and emotions are central arenas here and both are making possible and hindering resistance at the same time. (v) The last central ambivalence is gender equality/gender power. The gender equality discourse in Sweden is a widespread and a legally sanctioned ideology. It is permeating the whole society in the sense that it is inescapable when it comes to questions regarding gender, and in the sense that almost everybody agrees with it. On the one hand most of the activists use the gender power discourse, which is built on a logic of power conflict between the sexes, and on the other hand they – mostly persons with a heterosexual identification – rely on the gender equality discourse when it comes to practices around for example intimate relations. The first discourse is the most legitimate in the movement culture, and the second one is criticized for its supposed exclusivity (see above), and because it is considered to hide conflicts when giving priority to consensus and dialogue. No matter how critical they are of the gender equality discourse, it constitutes the background against which many activists articulate and act.

Heteronormative gender power works in many different ways and therefore resistance is built upon a variety of strategies, each adjusted to the specific situation. Or in other words: resistance demands an intersectional way of thinking and acting. My analysis of the activists' talk about resistance points out the double movement: through their passionate politics they actually destabilize and change the power structure at the same time as they reinforce it.