

EUrope: The Ups and Downs of Sexual Exceptionalism

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Brussels, 8 October 2014. The Austrian transvestite singer Conchita Wurst, the winner of the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest, gave a concert on Place du Luxembourg, the iconic square in front of the European Parliament. Invited by the Austrian Green MEP Ulrike Lunacek, who co-chairs the European Standing Group on LGBTI rights, she participated in an antidiscrimination event gathering more than 2000 delegates. On a stage covered with European flags, Conchita Wurst emphasized the values of tolerance, equality and diversity. She reminded people that the purpose of the European construction was a means to avoid war and to promote human rights and democracy in Europe and made explicit connections between this project and the defense of LGBT rights. Interestingly, on the poster announcing her performance, she was presented as the “Voice of Europe”.

A few weeks later, Conchita Wurst took part to another event in Brussels, the conference “Tackling Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination” organized by the Italian presidency of the European Union. This was the first event on LGBTI rights held at the European Council. Wurst rapidly became a symbol of the struggle for LGBTI equality in Europe and beyond. Her song was turned into a hymn for sexual freedom and she even performed in front of the UN general secretary at the UN offices in Vienna. (Ullbricht, Sircar & Sloomaeckers, 2015; Carniel, 2015; Baker, 2016; Stychin, 2014)

Wurst’s rapid rise occurred at the same time as tensions escalated with Russia in the context of the invasion of Crimea. As noted by numerous scholars, Vladimir Putin uses the opposition to sexual rights, and LGBT rights in particular, as a symbol of his political project, presented as an alternative to Europe and its decadent values and to the West more generally (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014a, 2016; Altman & Symonds, 2016; Wilkinson, 2014a). Wurst’s victory at the 2014 Eurovision Song Contest was, therefore, logically vilified by Kremlin officials, especially because the Austrian singer won over two Russian sisters. Russian authorities vehemently criticized the competition and threatened their withdrawal in the near future.

The juxtaposition of these two events shows how both Russian and European authorities associate Europe with liberal sexual values and regard the trans singer as a powerful symbol of this political project. This “linkage between ‘Europeaness’ and ‘gay emancipation’”, which “elevates certain forms of gay activist engagement and, perhaps also non-heterosexuality more generally, to a measure of democracy, progress and modernity” (Bilic, 2016, p.2), is used to define two opposed geopolitical blocks.

In this chapter, which builds upon earlier work with Phillip Ayoub and Roman Kuhar, I study how sexual rights became inserted into the European project and examine the specificities of sexual politics in the region. More importantly, I try to identify the promises, tensions and contradictions around sexual rights in contemporary Europe. While the process of European construction has been crucial to the progress of sexual rights in the region, I critically engage with this narrative to reflect on how gender and sexual equalities underpin a certain idea of European sexual exceptionalism. Exceptionalism is understood here as the possession of a feature that gives a unique mission to a state or a polity, and is seen as an anchor to its identity. This exceptionality is instrumental in establishing and consolidating a polity (in this case Europe) that has been increasingly contested in recent years (della Salla, 2016). Jasbir Puar recently applied the notion of exceptionalism to sexuality in the context of the war on Iraq. In her influential book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, in which she focuses on the United States, she claims that “exceptionalism paradoxically signals distinction from (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from yet mastery of linear teleologies of progress” (Puar, 2007, p.3. See also Farris, 2017 for women’s rights). More recently, this notion has been applied to European contexts in studies of sexual nationalisms and the logics of exclusion that derive from specific understandings of sexual citizenship inscribed in national states’ and European institutions’ ideational frameworks (Bracke, 2011; Ammaturo, 2015).

EUrope

Talking about the relation between Europe and sexual rights necessarily implies considering the process of European construction. Initiated in the aftermath of World War II to foster peace and economic reconstruction, the unification was an attempt to establish and to create numerous forms of interconnections between former enemies. Since then, European politics are characterized by complex interactions between regional and national levels. It can no longer be approached as the sum of national politics in different European states, but should be located at the interface between the national and the regional. In other words, if national politics still play a fundamental role, a distinctive regional dimension should also be taken into account. This is the result of

the development of a common European rights framework, as well as of more diffuse forms of transnational and cross-national influences (Paternotte, 2015). Today, the process of European integration is not restricted to politics but increasingly characterizes European societies, implying a dense network of interactions and numerous transnational exchanges (Favell & Guiraudon, 2011).

For many actors and scholars alike, the European project also involves an imagined transcendent dimension, which relies on the association of Europe with specific values, which would be unique to the region and help define its identity. The European project is therefore not only about peace and the reconstruction of a devastated Europe, but embraces cosmopolitanism and liberal values such as tolerance, democracy, solidarity and a defense of pluralism and diversity. As a result, Europe can also be portrayed as a normative entity. This is exactly what the British political scientist Ian Manners has tried to grasp in his study of the influence of the EU in world politics through the expression “normative power Europe” (2002). Interestingly, this power extends beyond Europe’s actual borders and fuels the external action of both the EU and some of its member states. It plays a key part in the image Europe is trying to build of itself, both internally and externally (Malmedie, 2016).

As illustrated by the example of Conchita Wurst, these two dimensions are crucial when it comes to sexual rights. The normative dimension of Europe serves as the foundation of its association to gender equality and LGBT rights (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014, see also Ayoub & Paternotte forthcoming for a critical discussion) at the same time it encapsulates Europe into a single entity that is precisely defined by this normative projection. The belonging to a political space that guarantees specific rights and duties has also been a major vehicle for the recognition of gender and sexual equality across the region, including in more reluctant countries (Abels & Mushaben, 2012; Lombardo & Forest, 2012; Petö & Manners, 2006; O’ Dwyer, 2012; Begeer, 2004; Stychin, 2001; Slootmaekers & Touquet, 2016). As shown in many studies, activists have used the European frame to push their claims forward, while forms of policy harmonization also developed across the region (Ayoub, 2016).

In this chapter, I use the concept of EUrope to address this double dimension – regional and normative – and to distinguish it from a geographical or institutional understanding of Europe. EUrope as an entity is not determined by its geography or institutions, rather it designates a normative entity that relies upon a certain idea of Europe. It cannot be reduced to either European states or European institutions, but articulates both the national and the regional levels through specific values embraced as typically European in the frame of a project of identity construction. Because of this transcendent normative dimension, the boundaries of EUrope do not necessarily coincide with geographical or institutional boundaries and shift over time. EUrope is indeed not restricted to

the European Union, but also includes the states belonging to the Council of Europe (CoE)²⁴, which is often regarded as the guardian of European values, to the extent they adhere to this normative project. Furthermore, this normative project has been a key inspiration for activists, who have contributed to push the boundaries of Europe further East. As noted by Ayoub and Paternotte, they attempted “to bypass national borders by imagining and building a new community” which would be more sympathetic to sexual rights, while “constantly displaced regional borders further East, expanding Europe and reinforcing its definition as a set of values linked to universal human rights” (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014b). Finally, because of its normative dimension, this project can be shared and promoted beyond the physical limits of Europe. European states and institutions are instrumental in exporting this model (among others as major aid donors), but it can also be seized or invoked by people on the ground in other regions. This is illustrated, for instance, by Cai Wilkinson’s 2014 research on Kyrgyzstan, where this idea of Europe is also used by activists to push their claims forward and strengthen their activism.

Building a liberal space

Europe is often regarded - and likes to be portrayed - as one of the most liberal places in the world regarding gender and sexuality. Gender equality has been consecrated as a founding principle of the European Union, as proclaimed by article 2 of the Lisbon Treaty, which states that *“the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”*. A wide legal arsenal has been adopted both at national and European level to ensure gender equality and, although regional disparities should not be overlooked, most indicators also place the region high on the global scales of gender equality.

Similarly, LGBT people enjoy comparatively high levels of tolerance and a vibrant LGBTQ community life characterizes many parts of the continent. In what concerns legal frames, same-sex relations have been decriminalized throughout the region and most countries offer generous antidiscrimination provisions. Many states, including several East-European ones, have acknowledged same-sex partnerships and thirteen of them (which is the highest rate across regions) recognize same sex marriage (Paternotte & Kollman, 2013).

24 The Council of Europe encompasses 47 countries in Europe, including Russia and Turkey. It is composed of three institutions: the parliamentary assembly (made of national MPs), the European Court of Human Rights and the Human Rights Commissioner.

This scenario is, to a large extent, the result of the work performed by activists who invested in transforming this normative project into reality on the ground (Hubert, 1998; Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014a). Invoking Europe in activist campaigns was a strategic move to bypass national obstacles and a form of venue shopping²⁵, but it also encompassed a normative ideal about what Europe should be. From the start, activists believed in European specificity in terms of values and considered that European institutions, along with the United Nations, could be used to build a more generous regional rights regime and to increase pressure on reluctant states within the region. They also understood the promises of a transnational legal and policy framework in fostering rights recognition in the whole region. Partly through transnational activism, they turned Europe into a vehicle for obtaining new rights at home and to press for domestic change, contributing further to the project of European construction from the ground (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014b).

Two early examples illustrate the scope of this vision. In 1976, the Belgian law professor Eliane Vogel-Polsky won the landmark case *Defrenne* at the European Court of Justice. By using the article 119 of the 1957 Treaty of Rome, which guarantees equal pay between men and women, she established the foundations of the EU gender policy. Although this article had been introduced to avoid unfair competition on the labor market between France and the other founding Member States, she assumed that Europe could do more for women and claimed this article should be more generously interpreted (Gubin & Jacques, 2007). Similarly, through his victory against the United Kingdom at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in 1981, the Northern Irish gay activist Jeff Dudgeon proved that the European project was crucial to LGBT struggles. This decision, which led to the decriminalization of same-sex intercourse in Northern Ireland, paved for the way for similar cases against the Republic of Ireland and Cyprus, and set the stage for the development of European policy promoting equality for LGBTI people.

These dynamics were further consolidated when a large number of European states and European institutions started to build ambitious equality policies, first about gender and later on LGBTI issues. While some states have played a pioneering role, the influence of European institutions should not be underestimated. The process of European integration has functioned as a major factor of policy harmonization and social learning across the region, while creating a more favorable political opportunity structure. This is illustrated by issues as diverse as women's political representation (Lépinard, 2007); sexual harassment (Zippel, 2006); equalization of the age of

25 Meaning that activists select the more favorable venue to push their claims forward, and may develop strategies articulating different venues over time and/or issue.

consent between same-sex and different-sex relations (Waites, 2005); and the decriminalization of same-sex relations or antidiscrimination legislation (Bell, 2002).

“A la carte” liberalism

While Europe praises its liberalism and is willing to export it outside its borders, critical scholars have highlighted some of the limits of European sexual liberalism, questioning the normative content of this project and the modes of inclusion proposed for queer subjects in Europe. Three of these limits or biases are discussed in this chapter: the selective endorsement of sexual rights, the increasing opposition to sexual rights in the region and the ways in which the European sexual rights vision contributes to the othering of specific populations both within and outside Europe.

Some scholars have pointed out that the European project relies on selective endorsement of a limited set of sexual rights, not the overall erasure of sex from the realm of European citizenship. This is illustrated by the fact that the most controversial issues, such as abortion, prostitution or same-sex marriage, have often been left to the exclusive competence of member states and, if the Council of Europe or the European Parliament has issued normative recommendations on these issues, most of their decisions are not binding. This is the case of abortion, which remains to a large extent criminalized in Malta, Poland and Ireland. Access to abortion has been restricted in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of Socialism, while the right to conscientious objection – on the rise in a country such as Italy – has become a major hindrance in several Western European countries (Heinen, 2014). Finally, anti-abortion movements have resurrected across the region and are particularly active in struggles triggered by anti-gender campaigns currently underway almost everywhere (Avanza, 2015) and several governments in the region are today trying to restrict access to abortion, most notably Spain, Hungary and Poland.

Policy debates on prostitution are further biased: the issue is seen as pertaining exclusively to national competences and important disparities remain at national level. European states have chosen to have distinct and complex policies (Crowhurst, Outshoorn & Skilbrei, 2012) Interestingly, trafficking is regarded as a EU issue, which allows some actors to try to Europeanize policy debates on prostitution. Abolitionism is currently on the rise at both national and EU level, as shown by the French decision to adopt the Swedish model and recent debates in favor of abolition at the European parliament. These discussions were led by left-wing MEPs such as Mary Honeyball, in close collaboration with the European Women’s Lobby, the umbrella of women’s

organizations in Europe.²⁶

Same-sex marriage and civil partnerships equally fall outside EU legislation, with important disparities across the region. Since Italy has adopted a civil partnership law, most West European states (and a few East European states (Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia) offer a legal status to same-sex couples. Their legal content, however, varies considerably. Furthermore, access to generous partnership laws is generally restricted to same-sex couples, while other countries preferred to create another legal institution that falls between civil marriage and celibacy, which is available to both same-sex and different sex couples but generally include a limited set of rights. Some countries have also introduced explicit marriage bans, such as Armenia, Croatia, Hungary, Macedonia or Slovakia.

These examples invite us to wonder about the actual content of the European project in relation to gender and sexuality democracy and rights. Indeed, the types of gender equality and sexual citizenship pursued at European level largely avoid entering into critical sexual matters, and the European sexual citizen paradoxically appears as desexualized. This is quite obvious in relation to gender equality, where progress was mostly made in areas not explicitly dealing with sexuality and often not in the sense of a positive approach towards sexuality. Similarly, the defense of LGBTI rights has usually taken an identity path aiming at the recognition of a specific identity and its protection from discrimination rather than at the promotion of the freedoms to be who you want (with a proliferation of sexual identities) and to do what you want. Sexuality is often confined to identity, which is a rather limited Eurocentric understanding of sex, and does not engage with the plurality of gender expressions and sexual practices. This bias is even more striking when compared to UN debates where the early politicization of both reproductive rights and HIV/AIDS – before the recognition of women’s and LGBT rights as human rights - forced governments and NGOs to open a wider discussion on sexuality (Corrêa, Petchesky & Parker, 2015; Paternotte & Seckinelgin, 2015; Petchesky, 2003; Swiebel, 2009).

Other scholars have investigated the relation between the European project and specific forms of activism, as well as their consequences on the forms of gender and sexual equality sought and achieved in Europe. As

26 As illustrated, for instance, by the 2007 Report on Prostitution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Doc 11352 Retrieved from <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-EN.asp?fileid=17590>, and the 2014 *Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality*, at the European Parliament (2013/2103(INI) retrieved from <https://timeforequality.org/news/sexual-exploitation-and-prostitution-and-its-impact-on-gender-equality/>

indicated by most scholars of EU gender and sexuality activism, NGOs are the most common form of involvement of civil society actors at European level (Lang, 2013; Paternotte, 2016). This arena is indeed characterized by a preference for conventional (elite lobbying, information politics, etc.) over unconventional strategies (protest, mass demonstrations, etc.). While more contentious forms of activism obviously exist in Europe, the European project predominantly relies on NGOs with the required expertise, which is strongly encouraged by a clear institutional and sometimes a financial support. This is particularly true in the field of sexual rights. NGOs have also become the most current form of organization around sexual rights at national level.

Scholars have pondered on the effects of NGOization on activism and the development of civil society (Bernal & Grewal, 2014; Choudry & Kapoor, 2013; Lang, 2013). It must be said, however, that most of this research discusses the situation outside Europe (Meier & Paternotte, 2017), and addresses feminism more often than LGBT rights (for an exception Davidson, 2015). Some of these studies show that in contexts where heavy international support exists, NGOization can de-structure national civil societies by empowering some actors over others and creating hierarchies between organizations. This appears clearly in Agnès Chetaille's ethnographic study of LGBT activism in Poland (2011, 2016), where the predominance of KPH, the biggest and best internationally connected Polish LGBT NGO over older organizations is glaring. It also renders national organizations over-dependent on external resources and locks them into short-term projects, following a traditional pattern of neoliberal organizing and management that often leads to weakening their ties with the grassroots (Bilic, 2016). Their legitimacy can be further undermined when these NGOs are perceived as (almost) foreign actors. Reversely, the sudden withdrawal of international support can lead local NGOs to collapse if they cannot find alternative sources of funding (especially when they are accustomed to a certain level of expenses).

Scholars have also questioned the impact of NGOization on claim making, arguing that some claims would be systematically downplayed or rejected because they sound too radical or disruptive. NGOs would avoid controversial topics because they are not likely to be obtained, or because they could endanger often precarious funding and jeopardize advocacy on other issues. For example, Nicole Butterfield argue in her work on the Croatian LGBT movement that *“although professionalized activism has provided some activists with the resources and legitimacy for engaging in lobbying and advocacy, it may have also limited the space for the possible emergence of alternative strategies within these organizations and the visibility of grassroots activism in the public sphere”* (2016, p.56)

Finally, by examining sexual politics in Southern and Eastern Europe, scholars have interrogated the underpinnings of the model of inclusion that was offered to these peripheral subjects. Indeed, the project offered to them relied on values and experiences consolidated in the North-West of Europe and activists from other parts of the continent were compelled to catch up with these “European standards”. This frame paradoxically re-enacts the binary juxtaposition of “East” versus “West” or “South” versus “North” in contemporary discourses on sexuality, and confirms the subaltern nature of peripheries (Chetaille, 2013; Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011; Colpani & Habed, 2014). Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska (2011, p.16) argue, for instance, that this model locates Central and Eastern Europe in a spatio-temporal impossibility. The politics of time that CEE countries are expected to fulfill do not correspond to their own trajectories regarding sexual rights, and these trajectories turn them into “‘European enough’ (geographically) ‘not yet enough advanced’ to become fully ‘Western’ (temporally)” (p.18). It also locks them out in a different and separate space that remains at the margins of the European project.

Similarly, Sandra Ponzanesi and Gianmaria Colpani argue that “Part and parcel of this conjuncture is the construction of Europe as “the avatar of both freedom and modernity” (Butler, 2008, p.2), which, however, is not only meant to strengthen the walls of the European fortress against non-European others and to support European involvement in US imperialist wars in the Middle East, but is also a particular function of the center-periphery divide *within* Europe. Europe is then configured as an actor capable of bestowing sexual progress, not only on distant others, but also on its own “backward” peripheries— both eastern (see Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011; Kahlina, 2015) and southern (see Colpani & Habed, 2014)—not necessarily contributing, in the process, to substantial sexual “progress” in such “not-yet fully European” locations” (2016, p.14).

Increasing opposition

If this gender and sexuality equality project is presented as intrinsically European, it has never been unanimously backed by all European citizens, but rather has always faced internal opposition. Furthermore, numerous observers fear that the opposition to sexual rights could be on the rise in recent years. This is a crucial point to bear in mind, especially when external critiques of the European sexual project, such as the one coming from Russia, could make us fall into a simplistic binary account of sexual politics which would oppose ‘us’, the supposedly enlightened Europe, to an often undefined ‘them’.

Against the fallacious idea of a united European ‘we’, European scholars are increasingly studying opposition internal to Europe (Hark & Villa, 2015; Köttig, Bitzan & Petö, 2017; Verloo, 2017). This attention was often

provoked by major campaigns such as the French *Manif pour Tous*, which came as a surprise to most observers. Against the sometimes modernistic and teleological idea that Europe was on an unstoppable way toward sexual citizenship, it made many actors fear a potential backlash, urging them to understand what was at stake. Scholars often assumed that these forms of opposition were largely foreign to the European experience (unlike in the United States) and that they were mere remnants of the past, especially in Central and Eastern and in Southern Europe.

Two forms of opposition that sometimes intersect have been identified. The first one can be described as nationalistic and populist and implies a call for stronger sovereign states that can resist an ever-expanding Europe. It takes different forms, from national oppositions to the EU to popular expressions of discontent, as it happened recently with Brexit. This is also the case of sexual rights, particularly, as previously noted, in regard to abortion, prostitution or same-sex marriage. These are indeed three classic issues in relation to which member states have resisted further Europeanization. States have taken that direction either because they fear that some rights available at national level would be threatened by European integration or because they fear to be forced to allow acts and behaviors they do not see as morally acceptable in their own country or suitable in their national culture. This suggests the absence of a European consensus on sexual matters, as shown by the diversity of national policies towards prostitution in Europe. It also reflects the adherence to the principle of subsidiarity against a European superpower, as happened with the blockage of the so-called horizontal anti-discrimination directive, which would have forbidden discrimination on a large number of grounds in all EU competences, and addressed some major gaps in the 2000 anti-discrimination directive, which applies only to employment. A few member states, led by Germany, have however been blocking this proposal from the European Commission since 2008, refusing any extension of the EU mandate in that area.

Popular reactions against the European gender and sexuality project also intersect with the current populist wave in Europe and pertain to the wider political attack against the 'elites'. In the populist mindset, sexual rights would have been imposed on citizens by manipulative elites, who also use international institutions to promote their agenda, for instance through gender mainstreaming. Especially in former socialist countries (but not only), opponents claim they are fighting a new totalitarian project. In this context, Europe appears as an elitist project that runs against common sense and affects the interests of average citizens without consulting them. It also threatens national interests and emasculates nations by forcing them to enter into an abstract bureaucratic project. No less importantly, European norms allow minorities to use political correctness as a strategy to impose their will on the majorities. Such populist opposition may take the form of what could be

called a form of gender fatigue and may include a critique of sexual freedom and sexual liberation, especially in relation to children's issues (e.g. Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017)

The second form of opposition is connected to a revival of conservative politics and is often intertwined with religious mobilizations. While Islam is often portrayed in public discourses as the major threat to women and sexual minorities in Europe, this opposition in fact comes mostly from Christianity, and more specifically from the Catholic Church. This movement combats a wide range of issues, from gender violence to sex education and same-sex marriage, under the umbrella of the so-called "gender ideology" (Paternotte, 2015b; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017). Once invented in the Vatican to both understand and counter the recognition of sexual and reproductive rights at the UN conferences of Cairo and Beijing, this expression has become a rallying cry for thousands of activists across Europe. It lumps gender scholars, feminists and LGBTI activists on the bandwagon defined by this terminology and claims that these actors work together to overthrow the natural order of mankind. Inspiring massive mobilizations in countries as diverse as France, Spain, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland or Slovakia, it draws another geography of Europe, which largely opposes the North to the South of the continent and extends its ties towards Russia through an awkward alliance between the Vatican and the Kremlin.

Europe and its outcasts

Although Europe was designed as an open and cosmopolitan polity, scholars have recently underlined the exclusionary potential of this political imagination. Indeed, if sexual rights policies are often celebrated as major achievements in the process of European integration, they have also become markers of Europeanness in recent years, first at national level and more recently at regional level. As pinpointed by an increasing number of scholars, gender and sexual rights are indeed increasingly used to define what it means to be European and have sometimes become a source of national and/or European pride. This first happened in a few European states like the Netherlands, France or the UK, where the defense of sexual rights has been used as a tenet of state nationalism (Puar, 2007; Fassin, 2010; Jaunait, Le Renard & Marteu, 2013). However, according to Francesca Romana Ammaturo (2015. See also Ammaturo, 2017), a similar phenomenon can now be discerned at regional level given that *"the insistence on a European standard of respect for the rights of LGBT persons is, in fact, perfectly functional to the strengthening of a model of European citizenship grounded in the liberal concept of 'tolerance' as a cultural and political marker of civilization as opposed to a specific conception of backwardness in the context of human rights protection"* (p.1152). This would lead to "the creation of moral hierarchies between insiders and outsiders" (p.1161).

EUrope was often presented as a way to overcome the hassles of violent state nationalisms by forging a common identity and promoting a cosmopolitan project. However, by claiming the Europeanness of these values, activists and institutions have been using strategies that are reminiscent of those used by nation states to foster a sense of belonging. As early as 1998, Carl Stychin claimed, in relation to the recognition of sexual rights, that *“Europe as a political identity produces its own national discourse through which it differentiates itself from “other” nations (both within and outside the geography of Europe)”* (1998, p.115). Scholars have consequently raised questions such as who qualifies as European and where is Europe, that is who and what counts as European. They have also pondered about whether this is constitutive of the idea of Europe itself because it necessarily implies the definition of boundaries between how one belongs or does not belong to EUrope or whether it happened because they are hijacked by other political projects such as rising populism and new forms of extreme right projects. These authors also paid closer attention to the borders that remain and those which were erected through this process in two different ways: by looking at how EUrope is compared to other parts of the world and by tracking what and who is regarded as non European.

Since Tocqueville, the United States have been used as a mirror to measure the progress of European civilization and this has also happened in relation to late 20th century European integration. It is not surprising that, from Victor Hugo onwards, the European project has often been presented as the creation of the United States of Europe: it is sufficiently close but different enough to allow a comparison on relatively equal terms. In recent times, Europeans have generally thought of their model as superior in terms of gender and sexual equality. As underlined by historian Leila Rupp, contacts between European homophile activists and those of the US were not exempted from a certain sense of superiority on European side (2014). In the same vein, US political scientist Angelia Wilson wrote a whole book to explain, as claimed in her title, *Why Europe Is Lesbian and Gay Friendly (and Why America Never Will Be)*, examining the political economy of care in the two contexts and the impact of different religious legacies. Finally, until recently, most scholars deemed that the Christian Right was typically a US phenomenon (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017).

As shown by an extensive scholarship, colonies and peripheries are another crucial point of comparison in European history. In this case, the terms of comparison are significantly more unequal and intersect in crucial ways with racial dynamics. As argued by Rudi Bleys, “the intersecting rhetoric of racialist and sexual discourse were embedded in European civilization, ideology and scientific innovation at the same time” (1996, p.11; see also Aldrich, 2008; Stoler, 2002).

Exclusion, however, does not only result from comparisons with other parts of the world, but may be a direct consequence of specific definitions of what it means to be European. While scholars have insisted on the redefinition of state nationalism to include women's rights or sexual minorities (Puar, 2007) or have insisted on the exclusionary effects of a culturalization of citizenship (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010), it is important to understand that the founding values of Europe may also generate forms of exclusion. Indeed, the notion of Europeaness often intersects with a longstanding idea of civilization, which implies that some individuals, groups and cultures are less civilized by locating them below European standards. The lack of acceptance of sexual rights or the criticisms raised by some groups or individuals is often interpreted as a sign that those who express these views are not European enough (if they belong to Europe) or not European at all (if they are located outside Europe and/or want to join). This critique can also be used as a marker to show that some individuals or groups of people are drifting away from Europe. As in the cases of Poland (Chetaille, 2013), Turkey or Russia, this is especially true on the peripheries of Europe. In the same vein, Spaniards may use the example of gender violence and the macho culture more widely to prove they still need to catch up with Europe. This association between Europeaness and a certain idea of civilization delineates the outer borders to Europe while reinforcing some internal boundaries.

In recent years, this has often intersected with populist and far right attempts to target Islam, presented as the main threat to sexual rights both inside and outside Europe. Building on a long tradition in European history, it conflates European and national (ist) values and regards Muslims as intrinsically foreign to them, constructing them as 'barbarians' or 'absolute others' (El Tayeb, 2011; Petzen, 2012; Rahman, 2014; Rexhepi, 2016). Often, it also posits that Europe should simultaneously protect Muslim women and LGBTI people from Muslim men, resuscitating the idea of a civilizing mission assigned to European states (Bracke, 2013; Rao, 2015).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the inclusion of sexual rights in the European project, described as Europe. I have insisted on the regional dimension of sexual politics in the region and showed how this association is justified in the name of specific values underpinning the European project. These values, such as tolerance, equality and diversity, would allegedly help define Europe's uniqueness in the world and turn it into a unique polity, which would welcome sexual rights more favorably. As such, this has been a powerful vehicle for the progress of gender and sexual equality in the region.

This association, however, remains fragile and is increasingly contested. It is seemingly not as solid or deeply grounded in the European project as some activists and policy-makers might have thought or defended. Furthermore, increasingly diverse voices raise criticisms against this enterprise. From within and outside of Europe, this project and its association to sexual rights has been attacked on the grounds of religion, national sovereignty, majority will, cultural authenticity, etc. As a result, this association, which once seemed intrinsically intertwined with the European project, might suddenly appear as merely historical or contingent.

Finally, while emphasizing the importance of the European experience, it is crucial to challenge this grand narrative by investigating its limits and revealing its exclusionary potential. Postcolonial and critical scholars have indeed highlighted that this normative project also operates as a powerful means of hierarchization and exclusion. It relies on an idea of sexual exceptionalism that isolates Europe from the rest of the world and creates different sorts of internal and external 'Others' while reiterating well-known colonial and neo-colonial tropes. Therefore, as argued by Ponzanesi and Colpani, *“engaging with “postcolonial Europe” today demands that we find ways to open it up once again, rearticulating Europe otherwise (...), this turning this particular province of the world into an object of political, transformative desire for those who happen to inhabit it, or just want to pass through”* (2016, p.7).

All this invites us to engage in a wider reflection on the supposed exceptionalism of Europe, particularly in terms of sexual rights. Indeed, at a time when the European project is facing increasing opposition, one can raise doubts about the alleged Europeanness of these achievements, and wonder how deep this project is engrained in the European experience. One can also challenge the idea of European exceptionalism and wonder whether this account does not excessively isolate Europe from the rest of the world and problematically claims ownership on values which are shared beyond the borders of Europe (Chakrabarty, 2007). In brief, to what extent is the defense of sexual rights an exception anchored in the normative dimension of European integration? Is Europe such an exceptional place in terms of gender and sexuality and what are the foundations and the conditions underlying such exceptionality? To what extent is this idea of exceptionality related to a sort of European provincialism and to a pretention to universalism and expansionism? Eventually, what is the future of sexual rights at a time Europe has lost most of its appeal for citizens and the European project itself is in peril?

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