

Nation State and the Sexual Representation of the Need for War

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The process of writing and giving a conference paper was very positive, but also one of the most challenging experiences I had during my Masters. Being involved in this project made me think about the complexity of the task, but also gave me a clear idea of what the academic process of researching, writing and most importantly, exchanging ideas encompasses. In the process of drafting a thesis the subject of the paper, its methods, observations, and chapters kept changing, and what I learned from this process was how 'to track' these changes and reflect on them on paper.

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Introduction

‘The state’ and ‘the nation’ are not sexually neutral political bodies. An individual’s political performance, including sexual/gender performance, is often located and predefined by the state. One can look at the relationship between the nation and the state in many different ways. This paper disentangles their often-intertwined relationship through the sexual representation of the need for war. In 1994, M. Jacqui Alexander’s (1994: 5) work “Not just (any) body can be a citizen” proposed a new way of looking at the role of the state by examining the state’s ‘marked... inscriptions on [the] body. Alexander (1994: 21) argues that feminists need to do more work to disentangle the state from the nation, because, indeed, our political mobilisations are located between the spaces of the state and the nation. She maintains that by looking back at the state we can reverse, subvert and ultimately demystify the gaze by taking apart the legislative gestures that have naturalised heterosexuality (Alexander, 1994: 5).

This kind of political and sexual representation done by the state is totally dependent on idealised versions of normative gender and sexuality, especially through the particular idea of ‘the happy heteronormative family.’ Because of the nationally established gendered practice of ‘happiness’ the space of individual political mobilisation often becomes a ‘grey area,’ highly sexualised and used by the state to proliferate heteronormative discourse, thus, constraining the scope of the individual’s political performance.

Judith Butler in her work with Gayatri Spivak *Who sings the nation-state?* (2007: 2) maintains that not all states are nation-states and thus, she continues, the state and the nation are already disassociated from each other but ‘cobbled together through a hyphen’. The central question she poses is: ‘what work does the hyphen do?’ I would like to propose a sexual representation of the need for war as a ‘hyphen’ between the state and the nation, and I would like to investigate the sex/gender politics behind the state-produced culture of representation.

This paper argues that in the idealised model of the sexual representation, the state, as ‘a paternal’ site, deploys the nation, as ‘a maternal’ site, and thus creates an affective bond between a desired individual and the nation. The sexually charged representation of the need for war is one of the many tools for the construction of the affective site to control the power of sexuality. This essay questions whether the state practice of the sexual representation of the need for war through the imagery of ‘the happy heteronormative family’ affirms or challenges heteronormative discourse. A key question this paper addresses is how the sexual representation of the need for war affects this dominant sex/gender system. The main concept behind this work, that is, an attempt to disentangle ‘the nation’ from ‘the state,’ is borrowed from the brilliant feminist scholar, M. Jacqui Alexander (1994).

Some Issues around the Sexual Representation of the Need for War

My concern here is to underline the visual and narrative imagery of the sexual representation of the need for war, how this imagery is embedded in our lives through everyday politics and how it reproduces present ways of life. There are many different ways to think about the reproduction of the ‘happy family’ in heteronormative discourse. I think that investigating affective attachments between an individual, the state and the nation that are produced through the sexual representation of the need for war is one way of telling the story. This paper proceeds to examine the representation and the construction of the history of the future rather than the representation of the past. Representation of the need for war is nothing more than writing the history of the future by perpetuating the dominant sexual discourse while limiting the revolutionary power of human sexuality. It constrains sexuality by reproducing fear and by reproducing the fantasy of the ‘comfort zone.’ The state, through the sexual representation of the need for war, builds a strong affective site that determines how and why we are drawn to ‘the nation’ and to ‘the state.’ This representation is done in two ways: 1) by constructing the fantasy of ‘the nation’ and 2) by reproducing ‘fear’ in the form of the exaggerated or fetishised image of the enemy, ‘the other.’

This paper will only address some aspects of ‘doing’ representation through the construction of the fantasy of ‘the nation.’

‘The State’

The state needs the iterative and repetitive practice of doing the representation of the need for war to perform its own masculinity and affirm its own patriarchal power. Butler (2007: 3) defines the state as follows: “the state signifies the legal and institutional structures that delimit a certain territory” although, she adds, not all those institutional structures belong to the apparatus of state. For the purposes of this paper the notion of ‘the state’ refers to all institutional structures whether they belong to the apparatus of the state or the power of the capital, for example. It is impossible to deconstruct “the state’s performance of the power in the patriarchal discourse without paying attention to the ‘interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, cited in Lambevski 1999: 400).

‘The state’ is, for Butler, a force that controls belonging and can potentially control non-belonging. She argues that ‘the state’ binds an individual in the name of ‘the nation’ (2007: 3). The very basic concepts that form the foundation of ‘the state’ in the patriarchal system need to be re-assessed and questioned. For that reason I would like to avoid mechanically deploying 19th century political dualisms (Puri, 2014) and, thus, reproducing the binaries. Hence, I will draw attention upon the queer inner nature of ‘the state’ apparatus. Jioty Puri (2014: 345) argues that ‘the state’ is not a monolithic, rational body; rather ‘the state’ can be seen as subjective with thoroughly sexualised aspects. In a similar vein, Begoña Aretxaga (2005) foregrounds the extent to which sexuality is central to state power: sexuality is central not only to the regulation of bodies through sexuality, or the managing and producing of desire and socially acceptable sexual practices for the formation of identities; sexuality and gender, she argues, also structure state institutions, agencies, ideologies and practices. Drawing on this argument she suggests that we see ‘the state’ as the complex assemblage of structures, discourses and practices that are

fragmented, contradictory, and marked as much by subjectivity as by reason.(Aretxaga, 2005: 165). The identity politics enacted by the state, therefore, not only ‘shapes’ docile individuals but also shapes the sexuality of the state itself.

The invocation of ‘the nation’ by ‘the state’ in these sexualised and gendered relations is the main field where affect operates in the form of national attachment or a sense of (national) belonging. This provides a kind of justification for a war – the need for war is equalled to the need for protecting the ‘happy family,’ which in turn reproduces the happiness of the nation. ‘Reproduces’ has here two connotations: actual reproduction and the reproduction of heteronormative patriarchal values. As an event, war comes to be represented, on the one hand, as an inhuman practice that ‘reveals’ the innate ‘evil nature’ of humanity. On the other hand, it is portrayed as a kind of defense (as opposed to a form of aggression), aimed at the protection of the ‘purity of the mother-nation’ against the ‘penetration’ of ‘the other.’ So, the moral legitimization relies on the heteronormativity at the level of representation of the national imaginaries. The representation of ‘the home’ as a particularly dense, affective, feminine site ‘softens’ the event of war. The right to protect your ‘private’ space, even with the use of disproportional force, is privileged over the potential act of violence. Aretxaga (2005: 169), sharing her observations about the intimacy of the social practices and spaces among the individual and the state, maintains that “the production of the nation – as both an object of desire and a space of intimacy – requires something more than rhetoric.” She further argues (via Anderson, 2011) that this “something more” is love and that “the notion of love should be elaborated within the familiar language of romance or kinship” (ibid.).

‘The Nation’

In this section I draw primarily on the works of Lauren Berlant (1997; 2002; 2011a; 2011b) to provide the necessary coordinates to locate how ‘the nation’ is sexualised, feminised, and used by the state. For this purpose sexuality must be discussed in light of a broader political context of

patriotism and nationalism. Berlant (1997: 1) argues that “a familial politics of the national future came to define the urgencies of the present.” The “urgency of the present” appears to be the nuclear family, which is the cornerstone of the national fantasy. The heteronormative family, the patriarchal unity, with neatly prescribed gendered and sexual roles, is seen as a proper space for reproducing the future (generation) of the nation. Maternal framing of ‘the nation’ can be understood in relation to metaphorical and actual reproduction.

In order to create a political and social reality that Berlant (2011a) describes as “floated by complex and historically specific affective investments”, the state needs to describe the patriarchal family as ultimately happy. What do I mean with the notion of ‘happy heteronormative family’? Back in the 1960s, Austin ([1962] 1999) made a distinction between ‘happy’ or ‘felicitous’ and ‘unhappy’, ‘infelicitous’ performance. He listed the following prerequisites for a ‘happy’ performative: re-petition, rituals, and the proper context. The context grants speech acts their intelligibility, and it also connects the productive acts to temporality and situatedness (Rossi, 2011: 11). Austin and then Butler (1990) define performativity as the repetition of the verbal and the visual acts that bring about ‘reality effect’ through their reiteration. My claim here is that this kind of practice is used by ‘the state’ to create an image of ‘happy heteronormative family.’ This state-produced imagery normally includes the visual/narrative representation of living in a heterosexual marriage, having children, embodying certain understanding of beauty and lifestyle, etc. Such imagery sets and defines “the culturally sheared site of happiness or an affective possibility for pleasure enabled by the proper heteronormative life choices” (Rossi, 2011: 11) in the framework of the (re-)production for ‘the nation’. The sexual representation of the need for war, done by the state through this ‘heteronormative happiness,’ stands for this sentimental promise about “the good life” (Berlant, 2011b: 2).

And yes, we can say that a sexual representation of the need for war strictly framed by the patriarchal power of ‘the state’ proliferates and affirms heteronormative discourse as “some

of the people seek to be miraculated by its promise” (Berlant, 1997: 6). The heteronormative family and ‘heteronormative happiness’ become then a kind of stereotype. For Bhabha (1990: 370), stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always in place, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated. But this very constant urge for repetition reveals the contest between the dominant and the less dominant practices: it undermines meaning, not only proliferates norms. Thus, a Foucauldian reading of the representation of the need for war through the over-projection of the imagery of ‘the happy heteronormative family’ would mean that underneath this dominant practice of happiness there are infinite numbers of practices that transgress and challenge heteronormativity.

For Berlant (1997: 8), the national political ideas that are fetishised by mass media and national culture industry are the zones of trauma that demand political therapy. She maintains that the abstract imagery of happiness in the peaceful future reveal the potential crisis of heteronormative practice. I think that heterosexuality and, mostly, the heterosexual family become tantamount to trauma for the individual.ⁱ The heteronormative family becomes a kind of illusion – an imaginary practice that is unattainable, mostly because in its representation by ‘the state’ we can read a kitsch which, for Milan Kundera (1999: 130), is “an absolute denial of shit” but also “an integral part of human condition”. And the culprit at the basis of kitsch is sentimentality. Berlant and Warner (2002: 189) make insightful observations about the interconnection among ‘the nation,’ heterosexuality and sentimentality, and argue that heterosexuality is “the mechanism by which a core culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship.”

The mass-produced sentiments that are tightly connected to the heterosexual aesthetics are only a cheap reproduction. Matei Calinescu (1977: 229) argues about the aesthetics of kitsch that “the whole concept of kitsch clearly centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception or self-deception. Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying.” On the one hand, this

‘reproduction’ gives no emotional support and is unable “to create a history of different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault 1982, cited in Bevir, 1999: 65). On the other hand, the state practice about the sexual representation of the need for war and the produced affective attachment of belonging to the fantasy of ‘the nation’ as a ‘perfect lie’ create a possibility to go underneath and detect what is going on in the underground:

The lie, the perfect lie, about people we know, about the relations we have with them, about our motive for some action, formulated in totally different terms, the lie as to what we are, whom we love, what we feel with regard to people who love us ... that lie is one of the few things in the world that can open windows for us on to what is new and unknown, that can awaken in us sleeping senses for the contemplation of universes that otherwise we should never have known (Proust, 1929: 184).

The heterosexual imagination of ‘the nation’ challenges itself, as it is a necessary product created by ‘the state’ but also its antithesis. National sentiments reveal much about how the idea of national belonging is constituted – the particularities of gendered sexuality are placed as central in creating the parameters of the nation as a project.

Conclusion

This is a brief story of the state’s affective investments with sentimental dividends. In my conclusive remarks I would like to go back where I started, and say that: yes, sexual representation for the need for war secures heteronormative practice, but also undermines and challenges it, because every dominant discourse includes the fantasy of practices that are potentially transgressive. This is a small account of how the heteronormative imagination of the

future is part of national politics, and I think that this imagination represents an important way to intervene in our relations with the state and the nation's sexuality.

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ⁱ I am using here the Berlantian notion of ‘the trauma’ and ‘traumatic event.’ In the introduction of *Cruel Optimism* the author maintains that “a traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systematic crisis or ‘crisis ordinariness’ and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated (2011:10).