

Queer Netherlands: A puzzling example

Gert Hekma and Jan Willem Duyvendak

Amsterdam Research Centre for Gender and Sexuality,
University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Sexualities

14(6) 625–631

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1363460711422303

sex.sagepub.com



Ever since the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s, the Netherlands has been at the forefront of championing erotic freedoms. Amsterdam became internationally renowned as a city of sex, drugs and rock & roll – the gay and sex capital of the world, wide open to the celebration of erotic pleasures. The change for the Netherlands was dramatic: from a society ruled by Christian political parties and a conservative morality to a nation where sex could be enjoyed by locals and foreigners alike.¹

The sexual revolution had far-reaching effects on Dutch society. While surveys show that most Dutch until the late 1960s were opposed to homosexuality, prostitution, pornography, abortion, divorce and pre- and extramarital sex, the majority a decade later claimed to accept such behavior. Stimulated by the NVSH (Dutch Society for Sexual Reform) and the COC (Center for Recreation and Culture, a code name for what would be baptized in 1971 the ‘Dutch Society for Integration of Homosexuality’), as well as by numerous social changes, the Dutch in the 1970s emerged as the most liberal nation in the world on issues of sexual morality (see Hekma and Duyvendak, 2011). This gave the Netherlands, and especially the city of Amsterdam, a worldwide reputation as a place of sexual freedom. Amsterdam became a magnet for foreign tourists, particularly its Red Light District and its gay scene. Sexual emancipation was a watershed for women and even more so for gay men – they were no longer seen as sinners, criminals or psychopaths.

This narrative of sexual liberation continued with twists and turns until 2001, when the Netherlands reached the pinnacle of its erotic freedoms with the legalization of prostitution in 2000 and the opening of marriage to same-sex couples in 2001 (being in both cases the first country to do so). In the eyes of the law, homosexuality and heterosexuality were now nearly equal, though legal equality did not mean social equality. While gay and straight alike saw these legal victories as the end of a long struggle for equal rights, the media began to report on regular incidents of queer bashing, gay and lesbian teachers and students remaining closeted in schools, and LGTB people being chased out of their homes. Social problems

Corresponding author:

Gert Hekma, Room O2A, OZ Achterburgwal 185, Amsterdam, 1012 DK, the Netherlands

Email: G.Hekma@uva.nl

that many Dutch believed belonged to a past era persisted, and were now often attributed to young ethnic minority men, particularly Muslims, in this case Dutch-Moroccans. Though this latter group was indeed over-represented in police statistics, all ethnic groups (including native Dutch) and other identifiable social groups (street kids, hooligans, fraternity students) were involved in these violent and discriminatory incidents.

Disillusionment over gay and lesbian emancipation grew in 2001 – the same year that marriage was opened to same-sex couples – when an unknown imam, Khalil El-Moumni, spoke out on television against homosexual marriage and homosexuals. El-Moumni had apparently written that Europeans were lower than pigs and dogs for accepting gay and lesbian marriages. 2001 also saw the rise to power of Pim Fortuyn – an openly gay man who denounced Muslims for their ‘backwardness’ – as the new leader of the (extreme) right. Fortuyn attacked Muslims for disrespecting women and gay men; he favored ending immigration and blasted the (in his view) failed and costly multicultural policies of the ‘left church’ (a term no one wanted to identify with). Shortly after he was assassinated on 6 May 2002 by an animal rights activist, his party – List Pim Fortuyn (LPF) – won 17 per cent of the votes in national elections. But although Fortuyn had stood for gay rights, they were not included in the party’s program; none of the LPF’s new MPs took up the gay cause seriously.

After Fortuyn, other right-wing and populist politicians such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders took up the gay issue,² crowding out the left-wing parties uncomfortable with the Islamophobic tone in the defense of gays and lesbians. Although the populist and right-wing parties may have had self-serving reasons to support women’s and LGBT rights, the performative effect of their pro-gay and pro-feminist stances should not be underestimated: almost the entire Dutch political spectrum from the far left to the far right now supports progressive positions that remain embattled in most other western countries.

Respect for gay and feminist rights became a prime battleground in the debate over multiculturalism (Duyvendak, 2011; Mepschen et al., 2010) and close to a litmus test for eligibility to immigrate to the Netherlands. The government made it part of its immigration policy when Verdonk was the responsible minister: a new immigration exam asked how the Dutch view gays and lesbians, though not whether the potential immigrant was in favor of homosexuality. Gay and lesbian rights thus became part of a test on Dutch citizenship. Some might consider this a positive development, which had been demanded by the LGBT movement, but it was a strange occurrence, suggesting that being Dutch implied embracing gay rights and practices. Note, however, that though up to 95 per cent of Dutch people claim in surveys that they accept homosexuals, 42 per cent report that they dislike seeing two men kissing in the street (precisely the image used in the documentary *Naar Nederland* for the immigration test) while respectively 31 per cent and 8 per cent express a similar dislike for lesbian and straight couples kissing in public (Keuzenkamp et al., 2006: 36). Obviously, a reason why this graphic inclusion in *Naar Nederland* was so eagerly sought by the right-wing parties was

to deter presumably homophobic and sexist Muslims from coming to the Netherlands.

Teaching Dutch citizenship through footage of gay and lesbian marriages and men kissing in public has led queer theorists to denounce the Netherlands for its Islamophobia in the name of protecting gays and lesbians. We share the concerns expressed by authors such as Judith Butler (2008) that a discourse on gay and feminist rights is now being used to discriminate against Muslims. Nevertheless, the latter critique seems to disregard pervasive anti-(homo)sexual opinions among many Muslims, as well as the need to promote sexual rights and erotic spaces for queer people, which remain controversial among the ethnic majority and minorities alike. We therefore encourage strategies that explicitly repudiate all forms of Islamophobia but do not silence those who fight for the sexual citizenship rights of all, and therefore have to fight against those Muslim and Christian groups that reject homosexuality and the sexual autonomy of women. Nevertheless, blanket statements about Muslims and in particular Dutch-Moroccans on issues of gender and sexuality essentialize culture and religion while overlooking queer and gay-friendly Muslims and the beginnings of positive change within these communities (see Keuzenkamp, 2010: Chapter 17).

The emancipation of LGBTs is at a crossroads: LGBTs have been highly successful, both legally and in winning general social acceptance. At the same time, violence continues (whether it has actually increased is uncertain owing to different means of reporting within police statistics, surveys among often unrepresentative groups of LGBTs and so on). And while the number of people who claim to accept homosexuality may be high, we have seen that this acceptance is only skin deep when it comes to specific issues such as men kissing in public. Other research indicates that gay men particularly are only accepted under certain conditions, such as not behaving in an un-masculine manner and not being too sexually explicit or visible (Buijs et al., 2009, see their article in this issue). The invisibility of homosexuality asked for by many Muslims is thus also demanded by many white Dutch, albeit in a different way: we accept you as long as we don't have to see that you exist or have to see what you do. For their part, lesbians continue to remain largely invisible in public life and the media.

How have gays and lesbians responded to these developments? Many younger gays and lesbians prefer to keep their homosexuality as 'normal' and 'private' – and thus as invisible – as possible. They resist strong identities and communities; young lesbians attribute dyke styles like short hair, masculine clothing and behavior to an older generation (Fobear, 2010). Coming out as gay or lesbian takes 3–4 years from first awareness to telling somebody, and this among those who have come out – not a sign of widespread acceptance (Keuzenkamp, 2010: 143). The incidence of psychological problems among male and female homosexuals is much higher than among heterosexuals (Sandfort et al., 2001). This is also the case among young gays and lesbians (Keuzenkamp, 2010: Chapter 10), where 16 per cent of girls and 9 per cent of boys have tried to commit suicide (Keuzenkamp, 2010: 191–193). Aggarwal (2010) found social pressure to behave 'normally' (like straight guys)

as well as continuing experiences of discrimination to be important explanations for the psychological problems experienced by gay men. So while the Netherlands may seem exemplary in its acceptance of homosexuality, this applies more to its laws than to daily life. The work necessary to break through the heteronormativity remains enormous and most straight citizens see no need for such changes. Straight norms are furthermore deeply embedded in gender relations, suggesting that the latter also need further change. Sexism remains rampant in Holland, certainly when it concerns questions of sexual autonomy for girls and women.

Many Dutch wonder where sexual emancipation is headed. Broad support for gays and lesbians seems to indicate that there is still space for forward movement, and here we can point to several promising initiatives: gay–straight alliances in schools, strong assurances by the police to fight anti-gay violence, and certain policy investments in LGBT emancipation. On the other hand, sex education remains largely biological while schooling on homosexuality or sexual and gender diversity remains marginal, not least because the Dutch school system supports a majority of religious – many Christian and some Islamic – schools, and because the so-called ‘black’ and ‘white’ schools are highly segregated. At the religious and ‘black’ schools, teachers are often not allowed or do not dare to touch upon ‘difficult’ topics such as homosexuality, masturbation or AIDS (van de Bongardt, 2008; van de Bongardt et al., 2009).

Some politicians also criticize ‘sexualization’ or ‘pornification’ – meaning that public spaces (streets, media, the internet) are awash with sexual imagery that would negatively influence women and young people. Such worries indicate that explicitly sexual material and language continue to be considered undesirable and dangerous (Hekma, 2009). There are, as elsewhere in the western world, ever more stringent laws and regulations concerning child pornography and pedosexuality. Sex with animals was recriminalized in 2010, after being legal for 199 years. The government has proposed raising the age of consent for work in the sex industry from 18 to 21 years. Street prostitution has been eliminated in most cities, while Amsterdam has shut a third of the windows in its Red Light District. There are various reasons why these more stringent laws and regulations have been proposed, including the trafficking or abuse of women, and questions of consent. These are indeed serious concerns, but some policymakers seem more driven by negative ideas about sexuality more generally than concern about the social position of the sex workers. The arguments are then misplaced, suggesting the protection of vulnerable women and innocent children while denying their sexual strength, knowledge and autonomy. The Dutch age of consent for non-commercial sex – at 16 years, the highest in the European Union – means that young queers who begin to realize their preferences and come out at ever earlier ages (the median now being 13 and 16 years) have to wait before they can visit gay and lesbian organizations, bars or internet sites. They will depend for years on largely straight institutions such as families, schools, youth centers and sports clubs. Concern over sexual inequality and non-heterosexual and non-adult options seems to underlie the new laws and regulations (see Hekma, 2011).

The heteronormative discourse is adopted by gays and lesbians who are often eager to act 'normally' by shunning unmasculine (for men), unfeminine (for women) and explicit erotic behavior. Heteronormativity thus becomes homonormativity as well, compelling both gay men and lesbian women to behave like straight people, making them afraid of showing any 'gay' or 'lesbian' signs, and prompting them to criticize others for behaving too much like sissies or dykes. Many gay men and lesbians share, for example, the ambivalent feelings of straight Dutch people regarding Amsterdam's annual Canal Pride Parade due to its ostentatious semi-nudity, drag and leather (Keuzenkamp, 2006: 234). Thus the homonorm has become not to behave in public like an effeminate fag, a bull-dyke or an erotically explicit queer. Though such invisibility may indeed be strategic to play it safe, it hardly furthers sexual emancipation.

There is still much to be desired for sexual emancipation in the Netherlands, and there remain numerous research questions to be answered. The Netherlands is witness to puzzling developments: once an example of tolerance and liberation, it has become unsure of how to appreciate the heritage of the 1960s and 1970s. On the one hand, the Dutch majority embraces gay and feminist rights (mostly in the debate on multiculturalism). On the other hand, social acceptance of non-heteronormativity remains thin and often opportunistic. Gender and sexual issues – from the erotic life of young people, homosexuality, prostitution and sexualization to pedophilia and bestiality – have all attracted political attention. Although the Dutch are considered to share a post-materialist, 'progressive' sexual morality, they nonetheless have significant differences of opinion on issues such as sexwork; anti-gay violence shows that general 'acceptance' exists alongside visceral opposition. Notwithstanding the politicization of such topics, no party has developed well-defined sexual policies, leading to haphazard decisions and heavy reliance on public opinion. The Christian parties continue to rely on religious ideas, while the secular parties prefer to think of sexuality as a private affair or a natural given beyond moral or political decision-making. There are few serious discussions about sexual citizenship; the preferred themes have become medical (sexual health) rather than cultural (pleasure) or political (citizenship).

The articles in this special section of this issue bear witness to this Dutch ambivalence. LGBT emancipation may have gone far but remains controversial, as is evidenced by anti-gay violence. And while gays and lesbians are broadly supported, acceptance comes with conditions, as is highlighted in the article by Laurens Buijs et al. Tony Coelho's contribution shows that while most Dutch may prefer monogamous relations and to combine sex with love, open relations are still entrenched in the gay world.³ There has been much research on the public sex of gay men, but little on that of straight people and lesbians. But these groups also enjoy sex in public spaces, although their meeting places are usually much more dispersed than is the case for gays.⁴ Sasha Albert's article reveals that while Dutch lesbians do indeed enjoy sexual pleasures in public spaces, some hesitate to accept the acts they themselves engage in because of lesbian-feminist ideals that do not endorse situational sex.

This issue offers windows on Dutch homosexual – and thus heterosexual – culture and its erotic liberties and restraints. As Dutch citizens, we are curious to see what direction sexual emancipation will take, and where future boundaries will be laid. As prejudices too often prevail, we would like to see more serious debate on erotic issues. Instead of shying away or retreating into the closet, gays and lesbians should engage with vital questions regarding sex education, visibility, ages of consent, gender roles and erotic diversity – in sum, the issues of sexual citizenship. Their experiences from what was once the sexual margin will offer a valuable contribution.

Notes

1. Changes in Dutch law neatly capture the evolution of homosexual politics in the country. In 1811, the introduction of the French Code Pénal under Napoleonic rule decriminalized sodomy, thereby ending an era in which homosexual practices were against the law and punishable by death. In the sexual realm, the new code only forbade public indecency, rape and bringing youths under 21 years into debauchery (generally interpreted as prostitution). 1886 witnessed the introduction of an age for sexual consent (16 years) and laws on pornography. A century after sodomy in private was legalized, the Christian parties introduced in 1911 laws that further criminalized erotic imagery, forbade abortion and profiting from the sex work of others, and which enshrined a higher age of consent (21 years) for homosexual acts and relations of dependency. Most of these laws were repealed following the sexual revolution, including the different ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual relations (in 1971).
2. All were members of the VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy) but Wilders and Verdonk went on to found their own parties: PVV (Party of Freedom) and TON (Proud of the Netherlands). Hirsi Ali left Holland after a fight with Verdonk while they were still both members of the VVD.
3. The possibility of marriage for gay men has led some journalists to suggest that homosexuals should give up their promiscuous lives and public sex.
4. The public sex of gay men is controversial. Although it is officially forbidden as public indecency, it is by and large tolerated and protected against queer-bashers by the authorities. In Amsterdam and Rotterdam, parts of parks are officially designated as cruising areas.

References

- Aggarwal S (2010) Between rejection and belonging. Exploring mental health disparities between homosexual and heterosexual men in Amsterdam. MA thesis, Social Sciences, University of Amsterdam.
- Buijs L, Hekma G and Duyvendak JW (2009) *Als ze maar van me afblijven*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Butler J (2008) Sexual politics, torture, and secular time. *British Journal of Sociology* 59(1): 1–23.
- Duyvendak JW (2011) *The Politics of Home. Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Fobear K (2010) Beyond a lesbian space? Public lesbian social spaces as sites for the production of visibility, identity and community. MA thesis, Social Sciences, University of Amsterdam.
- Hekma G (2009) Seksualisering is een alibi. Een ongelovige aan het woord. In: Bleys R, et al. (eds) *Lief en Leed 4: Seks en relaties anders bekeken*. Antwerp: Garant & Sensoa, 86–92.
- Hekma G (2011) Queer in the Netherlands: Pro-gay and anti-sex; sexual politics at a turning point. In: Downing L and Gillett R (eds) *Queer in Europe: Contemporary Case Studies*. Farnham: Ashgate, 129–142.
- Hekma G and Duyvendak JW (2011) Gay men and lesbians in the Netherlands. In: Tremblay M, Paternotte D and Johnson C (eds) *The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State*. Farnham: Ashgate, 103–118.
- Keuzenkamp S (ed.) (2010) *Steeds gewoner, nooit gewoon*. Den Haag: SCP – Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Keuzenkamp S, Bos D, Duyvendak JW and Hekma G (eds) (2006) *Gewoon Doen*. Den Haag: SCP – Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Mepschen P, Duyvendak JW and Tonkens E (2010) Sexual politics, orientalism and multicultural citizenship in the Netherlands. *Sociology* 44(5): 962–979.
- Sandfort TGM, de Graaf R, Bijl RV and Schnabel P (2001) Same-sex sexual behaviour and psychiatric disorders: Findings from the Netherlands mental health survey and incidence study NEMESIS. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 58(1): 85–91.
- Van de Bongardt D (2008) Teaching sexuality education in the Netherlands: Just another topic . . .? MA thesis, Social Sciences, University of Amsterdam.
- Van de Bongardt D, Mouthaan I and Bos H (2009) Seksuele en relationele vorming in het voortgezet onderwijs. *Pedagogiek* 29(1): 60–77.