

Mainstreamed into Oblivion?

LGBTIQ+ Cultures in the UK Today

Rainer Emig

(*University of Mainz*)

The State of Things

In 2014 marriage was opened up to same-sex couples in England, Scotland, and Wales (though not in Northern Ireland). This seemingly final amelioration after centuries of legal discrimination against lesbian and gay people was greeted with much public and media attention. Prominent couples, first and foremost the old stalwart Elton John, who – since his somewhat torturous coming out in 1988 – has become a figurehead of the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, but also younger celebrities, such as the diver Tom Daley, have since tied the knot and even fathered children with the aid of surrogate mothers. Lesbian relationships are still much less frequently reported in the media, but if they are, they are now generally portrayed as perfectly acceptable and even as adding glamour to a personality. The media history of the model and actress Cara Delevingne, who actively publicises

her bisexuality, is a typical example.

The present essay wishes to shed some light on the background and consequences of this seeming normalisation, but it also wants to challenge it. The challenges come from at least three trajectories. Firstly, how ‘real’ is this normalisation? If being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is now considered normal, how does one explain the following *Guardian* report from 12 December 2018?

LGB 16- to 21-year-olds are four times more likely to have felt depressed, harmed themselves and thought about killing themselves, according to a study based on interviews with 4,800 young people from in and around Bristol.

Experts said the numbers were linked to the bullying, stigma and abuse that some young people experience as a result of their sexuality. (Campbell 2018)

Secondly, does this supposed normalisation only have positive

effects? Does it not also lead to the disappearance of the dissenting groups in the eyes of the public and therefore to a decreasing awareness of their remaining problems? Thirdly, is being gay and lesbian perhaps now the 'new normal', while other forms of sexuality, e.g. those labelled queer, or other gender issues, such as those of transgender and transsexuality, have moved to the forefront of debates? After all, a BBC report from 7 August 2017 already mentions a remarkable rise of British children experiencing unhappiness with their biological sex and social gender:

In the last two years, the number of children aged 10 or under who were referred to the NHS because they were unhappy with their biological gender has risen from 87 to 216, including 32 aged five or under over the last year. It is something psychologists at the trust admit surprised them. They say it is impossible to know for sure why so many more children are being referred, but that it is clear there is much greater awareness and acceptance in society for young people to be able to talk about questioning their gender. (Bell 2017)

Examples illustrating these issues will cover the realm of the media, education, but also information concerning the daily 'infrastructure' of non-heteronormative lives, e.g. meeting points, pubs, bars, etc.

The Impact of the Social Media and the Supposed Death of the Gay Bar

Gays, lesbians and bisexuals spend more time on the Internet than other groups of the population (Harness 2017). This is also true for Britain. In terms of visibility and lifestyle, though, this contributes both to integration and to the increasing invisibility that was suspected of being the accompaniment of this assimilation into the supposed mainstream. Old meeting places, be they illegal or semi-legal, such as cottages (public toilets used for sex by gay men), swimmingpoolsandsaunas (again, mainly the haunt of gay men and sometimes marketed exclusively at them), but also cafes, bars, and restaurants catering exclusively for LGBTIQ+ people, are on the decline. London and Manchester were traditionally the most LGBTIQ+-friendly metropolises in Britain, though most other cities had a quarter or at least a pub catering for non-heterosexuals. When rural Gloucester lost its only gay bar in 2015, this even provoked a headline in *The Independent*: "What happens when a county of 590,000 people loses its only gay bar? That's what has just happened in Gloucestershire – but do we need them any more?" (Lusher 2015). The second half of the headline refers exactly to the questions of normalisation and assimilation raised above. Brighton remains another hotspot of LGBTIQ+ life, as does

(remarkably) the West Yorkshire market town of Hebden Bridge for lesbians.

In London and Manchester, the areas around Old Compton Street in Soho and Canal Street respectively became party heavens for the LGBTIQ+ crowd

are now ‘LGBTIQ+-friendly’ rather than exclusively gay, lesbian or whatever, which is, of course, also a result of considerable rent increases.

That Soho is not the only place in London where LGBTIQ+



Leeds Pride © Bryan Ledgard

on weekends. Yet once the British original of the TV series *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999-2000) had begun to promote the supposed excesses around Canal Street, the area also started swarming with heterosexual revellers eager to participate in the fun. Stag and hen parties began taking over, and with them the decline of LGBTIQ+ life began. The *Manchester Evening News*, in a line of reports that started as early as 2011, printed an article with the headline “There are fears the Gay Village is losing its identity” (Williams 2018) on 28 June 2018.

London’s ‘bermuda triangle’ in Soho proved little more resistant to such a straight ‘touristification’, so that even there pubs and restaurants

life takes place, and that the decline through the impact of the social media and ever rising overheads is not an inevitable destiny, however, was strongly emphasised in a comprehensive assessment by King’s College London in 2016. It questioned both customers and proprietors of LGBTIQ+ venues throughout London in a study entitled “LGBTQI Nightlife in London from 1986 to the Present: Interim Findings” (“I” stands for “intersex” in this use of the acronym). In the survey one reads:

A strong misconception is that LGBTQI nightlife in London equates to ‘gay bars’, and more specifically, to Soho. This is a sign of the success of Soho as a branded ‘gay village’ or ‘gaybourhood’: an important super cluster of bars, clubs and

other businesses. But it overlooks the way in which LGBTQI nightlife, in its diverse forms, has been dispersed across the capital and integrated into the fabric of many neighbourhoods and communities. Our surveys and mapping of venues and events has emphasised that London is distinctive because of the diversity of its LGBTQI nightlife scenes: surely the most diverse in the world. The range of spaces in which LGBTQI nightlife is accommodated – from shopping centres to theatres and art galleries – is remarkably wide. (Campkin & Marshall 2016)

The opening up towards straight customers as well as the contradictory tendency of first differentiating formerly ‘deviant’ sexualities into ever increasing identities (the longest acronym I could



Traditional Gay Pub in Old Compton Street, London

© Stephanie Sumner

find reads LGBTQIAPK+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersexual,

asexual, pansexual, kinks, i.e. fetishes; some of these labels have multiple meanings, such as queer or questioning, pansexual or polyamorous), before homogenizing them again for marketing purposes also goes hand in hand with the virtualisation of sexual dissidence. Dating platforms such as *Grindr* cater largely for a gay crowd and are infamous for their superficiality: if your profile picture lacks sex appeal, one swipe to the left will eliminate you from the game. (Its lesbian equivalent *Her* is much less known.) One could argue that this does not differ much from chat-up at the bar in former times, but a pub visit at least granted the visitor some minutes to view the scene and display her- or himself. The old staple of politically aware gay activism, the *Gay Times* (founded as early as 1984), is now more of a showbiz and lifestyle magazine, as is its competitor, the glossy magazine *Attitude* (founded in 1994). Is LGBTQ+ existence thus, as many of its critics assume, nowadays merely a lifestyle choice?

Many of these old as well as new information sources as well as dating scenes and devices were and are geared towards gay men. (The lesbian magazine *Diva*, for instance, is only available online and not in print.) Lesbians have traditionally relied on less commercial and public means of networking. This stems from the long-established invisibility of lesbians under

patriarchy (see e.g. Franzen 2000). This has also led to the historical fact that sexual acts between consenting women have never been criminalised in the United Kingdom – largely because previous eras could not imagine that what happened between women could be sexual, if they did not dispute the existence of sexuality in ‘healthy’ women altogether. The Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s onwards then produced politicised women’s groups in which many lesbians found a home – to the degree that haters of women’s emancipation often denounced all feminists as lesbians.

In terms of a commercial infrastructure, lesbians have always fared much worse than gay men, and it remains a bone of contention if this is because lesbians do not like bars and prefer private places of encounter or if the commercial scene has regularly excluded them as customers. An official London’s tourist webpage, visitlondon.com, sports an entire category labelled “Lesbian and gay bars and clubs in London” (note the order of adjectives!), which continues with the opener “There’s a huge choice of lesbian and gay bars in London, from relaxed drinking spots, to lively DJ bars and gay nightclubs”. If one browses the listed locations, though, one finds exactly *one* lesbian location, and even that is not exclusively so: “She Soho, primarily a ladies bar (although gentlemen are welcome with female guests). A

standalone bar for the lesbian community, with fresh decor and an indoor garden, this is a great place during the week to hang out with girlfriends.” But even the gay contingent is subject to the strategic opening up towards a straight clientele that was observed above: “A cafe by day, club by night, Dalston Superstore is a vibrant and trendy hub for gay and straight party people in east London, and one of the area’s best clubbing hotspots” (“Lesbian and Gay Bars” n.d.)

Now one could rightly argue that the opening up of venues for a broader slice of the population is really a step in the direction of normalisation and acceptability. Yet even if this is so, it also leads to the disappearance of what used to be sub-cultural and counter-cultural about LGBTIQ+-life in Britain and elsewhere. Normalisation here means assimilation into a commercialised mainstream in the same way that originally highly political Pride marches (usually tracing their lineage back to the Christopher Street riot commencing in the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street in Greenwich, New York City, on 28 June 1969 after a particularly nasty police raid) have become week- or indeed (as in London) month-long tourist events. Visitlondon.com has now reduced “Pride in London” to the catchy slogan “Celebrate the diversity of the LGBT+ community with the colourful Pride in London Parade through central

London, free festivities in Trafalgar Square and city-wide events.” Even if one reads on, there is no mention of reasons behind the event. Perhaps it has indeed shed its political origins, at least as far as glossy surface and professional organisation are concerned, and all that is left is entertainment and commerce:

Join the party as thousands of people of all genders, sexualities, races and faith come together every year for Pride in London. Pride in London celebrates the capital’s LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans +) community with a programme of events showcasing LGBT+ culture, including theatre, dance, art, cinema, parties and activities across the city. (“Pride in London” 2018)

It is to a large degree this party connotation (together with a liberal display of skin) that has made Gay Pride events known – and often given them a bad name, even among LGBTIQ+ people themselves. People who do not fit the image, perhaps because they are conventionally less attractive and fit, over a certain age, or simply not into mindless partying, easily feel excluded from such events and thus also sidelined by the LGBTIQ+ community that should by right be theirs.

Old Hostilities, New Enemies?

Now that the supposed mainstream has embraced lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and increasingly, though in often problematic ways, transsexuals, old and new fault lines keep (re-)emerging. In the same way as the Women’s Movement of the 1960s onwards often regarded gay men as problematic allies – because they were, after all, men and all too frequently pretty patriarchal ones at that -, the new “genderqueer” representatives of a younger generation often view gay men – and to a lesser degree lesbians, but, interestingly, never transsexuals – as the



U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom Matthew Barzun and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan along with senior members of the Pride in London team during a photo call before the parade at Pride in London 2016

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enemy. “Genderqueer” or “non-binary” stands for the rejection of the traditional male/female and masculine/feminine

binary in sex and gender. Yet if this is so, why do genderqueer activists not also criticise lesbians, and why are trans people generally exempt from their critique? After all, most of them transition exactly between the two sexes that the non-binary movement wishes to overcome.

The reason for making gay men (and now increasingly also more traditional lesbians) their target lies largely in their assumed success in having reached the mainstream. Many gay men and also some lesbians have indeed successfully reached the highest pinnacle of social esteem, and not merely in their traditional enclaves of the arts and show business. The list of LGBTIQ+ members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords (“List of LGBT+ Politicians” 2019) is impressive in its current sections, and they hail from all political parties (though men are, as usual, overrepresented). Ruth Davidson, the Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party, is a lesbian, the current leader of Plaid Cymru, the Party of Wales, Adam Price is gay, as, on John Bull’s other island, is the Irish Prime Minister Leo Varadkar.

What this view disregards is, of course, that many gay men as well as lesbian women, bi- and transsexuals still live at least part of their lives in the closet, out of an often justifiable fear of negative discrimination in the workplace and in their communities. The UK government’s own website now

provides an interesting list of types of discrimination, which runs as follows:

Types of discrimination (‘protected characteristics’)

It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of:

- age
- gender reassignment
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation (“Discrimination” n.d.)

In it, sexual orientation has equal status with pregnancy, and is even preceded by “gender reassignment” (the logic of the list’s arrangement is intriguing).

That discrimination against sexual minorities is still a daily fact is especially true for individuals living outside bigger cities, but also in stricter religious or ethnic communities. Their problems have not gone away, and neither has the common bullying of non-straight-identifying youngsters in schools, as the opening statistic of the three times higher suicide rate among homosexual teens amply illustrates. In fact, if one trails the Internet for famous UK gays and lesbians, one still ends up with a list

that largely consists of writers and media personalities – and remarkably few women (“Famous Homosexuals” 2019).

That many so-called genderqueer activists are not homosexual, but set out to challenge gender and sexual norms that they themselves hardly touch on in their personal practice, is another problem posed by this movement and perhaps explains its often doctrinal expressions.¹ Indeed, non-binary identities are, in contrast to same-sex marriages, not recognised by British law. The Gender Recognition Act of 2004 permits individuals to change their legal gender if they are able to provide supporting testimonies from two health professionals, but only between male and female. In Germany, a change in law from December 2018 makes it possible to opt for “diverse” now, without any backup requirements. A further complication is presented by in-fighting between a strange alliance of supposedly radical lesbians and anti-trans activists. At Gay Pride London in 2018, a group of so-called Terfs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) disrupted the parade. “The small group carried banners and flyers stating ‘transactivism erases lesbians’ and describing the trans movement as ‘anti-lesbianism’” (Gabatiss 2018). One of the origins of the dispute was a statement by the first-generation Australian-born feminist Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*

(1970), who refused to accept trans-women as real women (Greer 2015).

In the not so distant past, churches and schools and many parents taught their children that being lesbian, gay, or transsexual was an aberration, and the persons identifying as such best avoided. The infamous Clause or Section 28 of the Local Government Act, introduced by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government in 1988 (and only repealed in 2000 in Scotland and 2003 in the rest of the United Kingdom, excluding Kent) stated, after all, that

A local authority shall not (a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality; (b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship. (“Section 28” 1988)

The current educational trend in Britain, however, clearly represents a complete turnaround. In November 2018, the *Guardian* reported, “Scotland to embed LGBTI teaching across curriculum” (Brocks 2018), an article that also claimed that “In May, the Welsh government announced an overhaul of relationship and sex education in schools, with plans to make the subject LGBT inclusive and embed it across the curriculum rather than teaching it separately.”



Trans Rights Protesters © AnemoneProjectors

The conservative press, as is to be expected, never tires of reporting the latest ‘over-the-top’ idea of progressive schools vis-à-vis diversity education. A typical article, here from the *Daily Telegraph* of 6 September 2017, carries the headline “School bans skirts to make uniform ‘gender neutral’ for transgender students and combat complaints about ‘decency’” (Turner 2017).

What this chequered picture of LGBTIQ+ life in Britain today spells out is that, contrary to the impression that the discussions about supposed sexual norms and normalities have reached a convenient and comfortable truce, issues are still (perhaps once again) up for debate. On the one hand, traditionally conservative institutions such as the Bank of England now make diversity recognition (and perhaps also its exploitation) compulsory for its staff. At the same time especially right-wing populists try to turn back

the wheel by denouncing feminists as “feminazis”, a term attributed to the US radio broadcaster Rush Limbaugh, but one that also disgraces the headlines of the *Daily Mail* (see, for instance, Taylor & Payne 2015). The same not so silent masses that have very likely brought about the Brexit mess with their wish to see Britain return to the 1950s can openly express their wish that there were no LGBTIQ+ persons (or at least no visible ones outside the realm of media and entertainment), while radical genderqueer activists are busy challenging even the emancipation of gays and lesbians in their critique of integration and insistence on ever more diverse identifications. At the same time, lesbian groups, sometimes in tandem with anti-trans activists, dispute the right to trans identities.

This splitting of identities into ever smaller contingents is, on the one hand, the result of an individualism

that has been gaining strength since its emergence in the Early Modern period with its ideas of the emancipation and power of the individual. Coupled with an education system that refuses integration of individuals into collectives in favour of giving each individual what he, she, or it seemingly requires and an economic system that views every person as a potential customer, this may indeed lead to an increasing fragmentation or even to the end of communities and interest groups altogether. (That being non-binary and gender queer is now *de rigueur* can be seen, for instance, in the latest declaration by the already “openly gay” pop star Sam Smith, who felt it necessary to add that “he feels ‘like a woman sometimes’ and has considered having a sex change” [“Sam Smith” 2018].) If everyone merely feels solidarity with themselves, we might witness the end of society as we know it. Equally frightening might be the idea that people subscribing to such a rampant sense of individual entitlement might be powerless to stop those who, on the extreme other end of the spectrum, are happy to support simplified and homogenous idea(l)s of identity that are already waving well-known political flags.

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Endnotes

- 1 An early survey of positions can be found in Nestle, Joan, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, ed. (2002). *GenderQueer: Voices From Beyond the Sexual Binary*. New York: Alyson Books.