

The Commodified Queer Sublime

Written by Soheil Asefi

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SOHEIL ASEFI, JUN 26 2019

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My mom and I were discussing the relation of communists to the proletariat while watching skyline views of New York Harbor on a ferry tour to Staten Island. She is a long-time political activist who spent time in solitary confinement and underwent physical and mental torture in Iran's first women's political prison in the 1970s (Asefi 2016). It was her first time visiting the United States. Unlike most things in New York, the ferry is free. After a five-mile journey right by the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, our fellow visitors on the ferry were taking selfies as we approached Lower Manhattan. Closer to Manhattan, the movement of people and freight was steadily increasing. The certain moment of the spectacular in American culture was embodied in front of my eyes; what was lost in translation was the incommensurable distance between me and the people taking selfies. The spectacular was beyond the selfie, a fad deeply enmeshed in popular culture.

To tackle the limits of translation, the term 'spectacular' is helpful to depict the use of selfies and the very culture produced under a regime of neoliberalism as symptomatic of the power of social media to turn public spaces into private displays of commodification. Without its consumption aspect, 'spectacular' is unable to depict the 'awesomeness' of the dominant American culture in the air. This simple story of 'awesomeness' is one of the most common conditions in everyday American life and resonates with complex themes like commodification which is strongly associated with sexualisation and which charges everyday objects with desire. That was my train of thought as I tried to trace the interconnection in the spectrum of 'awesomeness' to 'greatness' and 'coolness' in a conversation with 'spectacular' on a ferry tour.

Desirable queer possibilities of 'queerness' outside the 'Western'/American/English-speaking contexts struck my mind. Nevertheless, the ferry itself was symbolic of crossing to the other side. Whether or not 'the other side' is capable of tackling the question of belonging beyond top-down forms of transnational political agency remains an open question. Putting aside the ferry as a 'means of transportation', there is also a great potential for other layers to surpass the limits of 'transnational advocacy networks'. However, the deeper level of the ferry narrative may simply fall into the trap of queer performativity which, it would seem, has become a Euro-American political obsession.

Meanwhile, the Communist Manifesto was trying to connect the dots and the intersection between queerness, the sublime, and the creation of self, 'the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country' (Marx 1996). This staged an encounter with the most widely held assumption in queer theory today: that the political value of the field lies in its antinormative commitments, along with the necessity to rethink the meaning of norms, normalisation, and the normal breaking from private property forms of relationship ('love'); in other words, it necessitates the abolition of private property within relationships of production (Cotter 2012).

Closer to Manhattan, the movement of people and freight was steadily increasing. Once again, that certain moment of the sublime spectacular in American culture was embodied in front of my eyes which reminded me of transformations in border governmentalities which have affected the mobility of 'ordinary' travellers; among the 'diverse' excited crowd of the moment of spectacular, a number of individuals were the direct and indirect consumers of 'the security and development' in need of LGBTQIA subjects as key terrains in geopolitical struggles around war

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and security as well as around human rights and norms diffusion. As the philosopher Edmund Burke says, when we are astonished, or shocked, our mind is completely filled with the object which caused that feeling.

The spectacular moment of value creation with aesthetic capital overshadowed rational powers of a number of people on the ferry. This is the feeling called 'the sublime' according to Burke. Yet having declared New York City an 'awesome' city in the world, Lady Gaga waved the flag of rainbow capitalism in the 'spectacular' way visible from the ferry, chanting, 'make America diverse again'; Gaga's LGBTQIA diversity intersects with normative understandings of 'normal military policies', and 'normal just wars'. This sexualised order of international relations made me think of the connection between the headlines of *The New York Times* like 'ISIS kills Gays' and 'Iran hangs Gay men', and the *BBC's* 'Meet Iran's gay mullah forced to flee the country'. Yet along the exotic subject of 'Gay Mullah', these brown bodies had also become the subjects of torture, rape, and execution in the prisons of Abu Ghraib, in Bagram, and Tehran's Evin prison, where I was kept in solitary confinement for many months for the crime of being an 'independent leftist journalist'. In that prison, thousands of jailed Iranian anti-imperialist forces were killed and buried in mass graves like Khavaran cemetery in the 1980s (Asefi 2013).

LGBTQIA identity in the West is a product of specific Euro-American histories and social formations as John D'Emilio put it in his seminal and widely influential essay linking 'gay' identity with 'free labour' under capitalism (D'Emilio 1983). When this set of values became an indispensable part of the package of liberal imperialist forces for the global South, understanding contemporary sexuality and gender politics in one of the targeted countries of Washington compels an examination of the imbrications between the idea of modernity, the production of non-normative identity-based social categories, and critiques of neoliberalism. The tyrannies of sexual and gender normativity have been widely examined in queer theory. Heteronormativity, homonormativity, whiteness, family values, marriage, monogamy, Christmas, have all been objects of sustained critique, but what is at stake is whether what remains of queer theory is able/not able to address the complexities of the situation in a way similar to the way the plights of fallen anti-capitalist forces from US-targeted countries like the Islamic Republic in Iran have been commodified by the human rights industry. As far as those large parts of a generation of macho leftists need to be studied in this regard, the history of desire and militancy needs to be at the centre of this queer study which usually tends to reduce political agency to a vague, impotent, and merely performative framework in Western academia rather than get into the importance of class and explore the sexual dimensions of different concepts of Marxist political economy in the region beyond the fashionable imperial narrative of 'democracy versus dictatorship'.

While the dominant imperialist power chooses which bodies and sexualities need to be 'saved' and which 'homophobic' Muslims need to be 'civilised', the barbaric masculinity of a neoliberal theocracy in transition like the one in Iran makes it more difficult to talk about the necessity of going beyond the Western regime of sexuality and its primitive homo/hetero binary which is the effect of a colonial epistemology.

The place where I was 'born and raised', has always been the subject of international scrutiny since the incomplete 1979 Revolution and the rise of the theocratic regime under the well-worn slogan 'Death to America'. The US declared it a member of the 'axis of evil' in 2002, under President George W. Bush. This doctrine, the logical continuation of Martin Indyk's policy of dual containment, has been perpetuated by subsequent US presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump with each applying different tactics. The Gay Internationalists, who work under the assumption that Muslim 'LGBTQ people', like women, need to be saved from their own oppressive traditions, have co-opted the Islamophobic logic that fuels the so-called War on Terror to try to impose mainstream LGBTQIA 'values' under the guise of 'human rights'. As a matter of fact, the dangerous discourse of 'rights' has always been exported to the periphery, whether through direct military intervention and/or crippling sanctions or through foreign direct investment and the installation of 'trickle-down economics' for the sake of 'democracy promotion' – the combination of hard and soft power according to Joseph Nye (2009).

Had she been born in a different country, mom thought, and without the education to qualify as a long-time Marxist revolutionary in Iran, she might have become an American opera singer, offering her massive talent to an 'awesome' crowd in Metropolitan Opera. But the idea, explored in detail – what, who, when, where, why, how – those questions mom had obediently followed in her life from a very young age. According to Burke, the sublime is usually something larger than you, and dangerous, like the ocean, but if something is large and not scary, like a huge field of wheat, it is

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not sublime. We approached Manhattan, a capitalist sublime, half a decade after the riots at Stonewall; the historic place had been completely co-opted by pink capitalism. The drag queens were now striving to portray a broader image of what 'queer' means to 'politicise' sexual practices for the LGBTQIA industry. Integrating drag/trans/queer bodies into an unchanged homonormative and gender-normative mainstream which can be the subject of a radical queer theory study has also to confront the exilic yearning, capitalism (later neoliberal), and Euro-American hegemony.

As Jasbir Puar (2007) argues, the consolidation of homonormativity travels through orientalist imaginings of 'Muslim sexuality'. What is at stake is whether the word 'queer', after queer theory, would be able to wrest sexuality from the dead end of identity politics (Penny 2013). It would be naïve to underestimate the ongoing project of neo-imperialism in the Middle East without putting it into the context of queer antinormativities which are themselves captured on behalf of governing social, cultural, political, and economic institutions. In other words, if queer refers to the community of people whose gender and/or sexuality do not fit into hegemonic norms, it is the commodification of queer culture that paves the way for liberal imperialists to impose the Western regime of sexuality under the guise of 'rights' to countries in the semi-periphery (Wallerstein 2004).

Take for instance one of the stories of the Iranian liberal reporter of *The Guardian* (Kamali Dehghan 2017) as evidence that Gay Internationalists have dominated the public sphere to shape a specific mainstream LGBTQIA agenda in one of the targets of US imperialism in the Middle East. Bahman Mohassess, a prominent exiled Iranian artist dubbed by some as the 'Persian Picasso', was a radical leftist thinker central to the development of Tehran's burgeoning counter-culture of the 1960s and 70s. Yet he has now been reduced to the category of an 'Iranian Gay Artist' next to his Western fellow artist Francis Bacon to make its Western orientalist audience motivated to read the liberal narrative of victimisation under the guise of 'rights'.

While being 'homosexual' did not have anything to do with him being reclusive and he lived his sexuality fully in a hypersexualised society, the homonormative narrative of his 'national identity' and 'sexual identity' is an indication of the global political economy at work and the significance of imperial soft power exercised through LGBTQIA liberal venues. The documentary film *Fifi Howls from Happiness*, which is named after one of his paintings, provides a unique insight into Mohassess's life in exile: it goes beyond normative understandings of gender and sexuality to intersect with normative understandings of war, democracy, human rights, and the myth of the trickle-down economy. As a matter of fact, the erasure of the history of struggle for socialism in the Middle East (historical opportunism and revisionism) contributed a great deal to the imagined geographies of 'gay-friendly' versus 'homophobe' states in the region. It was key to erase anti-imperialist agency in the 'human rights' package so democracy promoters could pave the way for the exportation of any kind of colonial product to the Middle East and North Africa. Many of these so-called democracy promotion agendas are focused on the rights discourse within the framework of heteronormative pink capitalism, and their ramifications are felt primarily in the middle and upper classes of Iranian society. The working and lower-class realities of most Iranians and the complexities of sexuality regarding wage labour, meanwhile, have little or nothing to do with the rainbow packages of 'visibility' that have been exported by hashtag movements of Gay Internationalists as journalist and human rights activists and academics on Silicon Valley's toys. As a matter of fact, the pro-West revisionist historians in the role of 'democracy' promoters like the one at the neoconservative Hoover Institution's Iran Democracy Project^[1] have taken advantage of the tyranny of the Islamic Republic as a theocracy in transition in Iran and have spread profound confusion about the nature of the class struggle. The line of these 'democracy promoters'/'native informers' is based both upon transnational networks and the mainstream human rights discourse – main tools of the US State Department and various think tanks.

Indeed, the topic of LGBTQIA people in 'developing' countries like Iran has been at the centre of the development of a new market-oriented masculinity that is spreading to 'heterosexual' men and contributes to the formation of neo-imperialism in the region. The mainstream narrative in the case of Iran today reduces complex social realities to a cartoonish image – pro-Western(rights) civilised 'Moderates' and 'Reformists' versus Islamist fundamentalists ('Hardliners'/'Principlists'). Having practiced a profound amnesia regarding their own past, a large part of Iran's leftists in exile follow the dominant discourse of the Western regime of sexuality and 'rights', while sexual masochism disorder is still the most significant epidemic among them and a number of men and women within the leftist Iranian intellectual community struggling to survive under the ideological apparatuses of the Islamic Republic. Hence

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questions such as ‘has the Left got a past? And if so, is that past best forgotten?’ Which Phil Cohen raised in his recent book *Archive That, Comrade! Left Legacies and the Counter Culture of Remembrance*, a searing meditation on the politics of memory regarding an emancipatory anti-capitalist and non-hetero/homo normative project of struggle in the Middle East.

Along the same lines, the dominant narrative of ‘queer’ identities and the LGBTQIA industry with its politics of ‘coming out’ and ‘visibility’ has been exported to the global periphery, yet it has failed to tackle the politics of belonging beyond the mainstream paradigms of identity politics. Thus, the ‘out of place’ concept of exile is not able to construct a non-commodified action of questioning and challenging issues on gender, sexuality, sovereignty, imperialism, culture, borders, history, citizenship, identity, displacement, and belonging. Hence, the sublime acts as a point of rupture. If the term ‘revolutionary’ has morphed into the sexier term ‘activist’ with the commodification of activism and the NGO-isation of resistance, why would the dominant colonial language based on the homo/hetero binary of the Western regime of sexuality not become part and parcel of a broader issue of power and hegemony? The way normative and/or non-normative genders and sexualities sustain – and contest – international formations of power is the crux of the matter.

While the discussion went on, we got to the moment of the sublime: Lower Manhattan. ‘Cute’, I had this message pop up on my Scruff profile. ‘Is cute beautiful?’ I asked. The person, who branded himself ‘sapiosexual’ on the other side, looked at me virtually with faux innocence of the wide-eyed sort. He was not sure what it is, ‘awesome! Can you explain?’ He asked. I then replied, ‘how is awesome inscribed or translated into cuteness?’ The ocean was at the end of this ‘conversation’ like all everyday random messages on online dating apps, a common pre-orgasmic unrequited ‘queer’ issue?! Adrienne Rich’s *Diving into the Wreck* was music in my ear that the relations between the sexes and self-knowledge can be won only through the act of criticism. ‘Where are you from?’ he asked. The politics of home and memory once again struck my mind; as a writer in exile, I have confronted this situation several times and have always mentioned the fact that I have increasingly felt myself to be more an outsider in my country of birth than in other places in the world. If the home, the nation, the marketing brand of LGBTQIA are the only potential spaces of belonging, then where is home beyond these spaces which are simultaneously tied together by media messages and the workings of the real estate market, by the commodification of the body and the reification of desire (whether in a pretentious vibe of academia or on a hook-up app), and by macro factors such as the immigration policies of the state and the impact of the global economy? Is a homogeneous understanding of diasporic subjects able to depict political agency beyond the categorical assumptions of queer theory?!

The crow in Pasolini’s ‘The Hawks and the Sparrows’ comes to assist me with the ‘where are you from?’ question, ‘I come from far away. My country is ideology. I live in the capital, the city of the future, on Karl Marx Street’.

The man in the red tie said something, and mom, not catching the words, nodded in confirmation. ‘So, you like the ocean?’ he said with disapproval, and then, forgivingly, ‘Most people do’.

Notes

[1] See for instance the works of Abbas Milani of the Hoover Institution at <https://www.hoover.org/profiles/abbas-milani>

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Soheil Asefi is a journalist and scholar. He studied Political Science at The New School for Social Research and is a PhD student of Sociology at the University of Nevada. Soheil Asefi was Nuremberg's guest under the German PEN project "Writers in Exile", and received the German Hermann Kasten award. He has written extensively on the politics of belonging, commodification, imperialism and the dimensions of democratisation and neoliberalisation in the Middle East.