



DECONSTRUCTING STRAIGHT CITIZENSHIP

A GENEALOGY OF MODERN DANISH CITIZENSHIP'S HETERONORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS

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CITATION: CONJUNCTIONS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF CULTURAL PARTICIPATION, VOL. 7., NO. 1, 2020
DOI: [HTTP://DX.DOI.ORG./10.7146/TJCP.V7I1.119860](http://dx.doi.org/10.7146/TJCP.V7I1.119860)

ABSTRACT

ON NOVEMBER 25 2019, DANISH HISTORIAN NIELS NYEGAARD RECEIVED THE NATIONAL KRAKA AWARD FOR AN OUTSTANDING AND INNOVATIVE CONTRIBUTION TO GENDER RESEARCH IN DENMARK FOR HIS PHD DISSERTATION *PERVERSE CRIMINALS AND GOOD CITIZENS: HOMOSEXUALITY, HETERONORMATIVITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN COPENHAGEN'S PUBLIC SPHERE, 1906-11*. NYEGAARD DEFENDED HIS DISSERTATION AT AARHUS UNIVERSITY IN THE FALL OF 2018. THE DISSERTATION CONDUCTED A GENEALOGICAL STUDY OF MODERN DANISH CITIZENSHIP'S HETERONORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DENMARK. IN HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH, NYEGAARD OUTLINED THE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS FROM HIS DISSERTATION. HE FURTHER PRESENTED ITS FOUCAULDIAN AND QUEER THEORETICAL AXIOMS AND ITS GENEALOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP, HETERONORMATIVITY, HOMONORMATIVITY AND HOMONATIONALISM.

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NIELS NYEGAARD IS A CULTURAL HISTORIAN WHOSE RESEARCH INTERESTS LIE IN THE ALIGNMENTS BETWEEN GENDER, SEXUALITY AND CITIZENSHIP IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY DENMARK. AMONGST HIS PUBLICATIONS IN ENGLISH ARE 'HETERONORMATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF MODERN CITIZENSHIP IN EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DENMARK', *NORA: NORDIC JOURNAL OF FEMINIST AND GENDER RESEARCH* (2017).



Acceptance speech by Niels Nyegaard

I am happy and not least much honored to receive the KRAKA Award for my PhD dissertation. In an academic world characterized by lonely office hours, strong mutual competition and high performance standards, the writing of a dissertation is not always easy. You can easily become doubtful about others' opinions of your work and its quality. Therefore, it is with great pleasure and pride that I accept the KRAKA Award today.

I would like to begin by thanking the researchers who have recommended my dissertation to the award committee and of course the committee itself for finding it worthy of this honor. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Nina J. Koefoed, and those of my colleagues who have read, commented and discussed my ongoing work over the past years. Without your indispensable critiques and encouragement, my dissertation would not have reached its present state.

A genealogical contribution

With my PhD dissertation *Perverse criminals and good citizens: Homosexuality, heteronormativity and citizenship in Copenhagen's public sphere, 1906-11* (Nyegaard, 2018), I first and foremost attempt to initiate the writing of a genealogy over the historical alignment between Danish citizenship and heterosexuality. Hereby, I do not mean that I try to uncover some kind of lost origin where a natural, pure and ideal union between citizenship and heterosexuality existed. By contrast, I follow Foucault's idea of the genealogical method as an analytical approach that "disturbs what was previously considered immobile; [that] fragments what was thought unified; [that] shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (Foucault, 1977, p. 147).

Following this idea, I especially seek to make a genealogical contribution to the contemporary political and scholarly discussions that surround the homosexual figure's recent transformation into an included citizen. As numerous scholars have observed, this transformation has taken place in many parts of the Global North after the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g. Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2003; Plummer, 2003; Puar, 2007; Richardson, 2004; Rydström, 2011; Seidman, 2002; Warner, 1999; Weeks, 1998). The transformation entails, in short, that gay men and lesbians increasingly have shed their traditional stigmas as pathological, ungrievable and always-already dead subjects (Bech, 1997; Bersani, 1987; Butler, 1992, 2004; Nunokawa, 1991a, 1991b; Watney, 1987). Instead, they now appear within their national communities as included citizens with civil rights to marriage, family life and reproduction. In Denmark, the law on registered partnership from 1989 in many ways initiated this transformation. So far, it has reached a preliminary culmination with the legal introduction of gay and lesbian church weddings in 2012 (Nebeling Petersen, 2013; Rydström, 2011).

The homosexual figure's recent transformation into an included citizen has already given rise to numerous political and scholarly discussions. Within academia, the Danish discussions have, among other things, concerned the historical conditions for this transformation, its actual starting point, its relation to the heterosexual marriage institution and, not least, to Denmark's supposedly exceptional tradition of sexual liberalism [frisind] (Bech, 1992, 2002; Edelberg, 2012; Lützen, 1998; Nebeling Petersen, 2013; Stormhøj, 2003; Søland, 1998). In these discussions, Danish scholars have both drawn on and further developed existing international theories about citizenship and sexuality, such as sociological theories about sexual or intimate citizenship (Plummer 1995, 2003; Weeks, 1998) and queer theoretical concepts like heteronormativity (Warner, 1993), homonormativity (Duggan, 2003) and homonationalism (Puar, 2007).

Although I find these discussions and theoretical frameworks both important and intellectually stimulating, I cannot help feeling a certain hesitancy towards them. My hesitancy especially concerns the fact that they often include a particular underlying narrative: That an apparently always-already heterosexual citizenship in recent years has begun to accommodate a former sexual outsider, the homosexual figure. Significantly, within this narrative, the alignment between citizenship and heterosexuality – quite inadvertently and unwillingly, I am sure – often appears to be something given in advance, perhaps even something that is original or normal. At any rate, the alignment in itself rarely becomes an object of critical analysis.¹

As a subject that personally has felt the at times brutal effects of heterosexuality's claim to being normal, I find this lack of critical analysis problematic in more than one way. Therefore, I seek to contribute to existing political and scholarly discussions about

the homosexual figure's recent citizen transformation by examining the alignment between citizenship and heterosexuality that historically has preceded it. Based on Foucault's idea of the genealogical method, it is my contribution to show that the union between citizenship and heterosexuality has a history and that the very formation of this union can be uncovered – and possibly deconstructed – in a historical perspective.

Closet and citizenship²

In my dissertation, I trace the historical alignment between Danish citizenship and heterosexuality back to the turn of the 20th century, a very formative period for both Danish citizenship (e.g. Borchorst & Dahlerup, 2015; Koefoed, 2008; Larsen, 2010; Melby, Pylkkänen, Rosenbeck & Wetterberg, 2008) and the modern homo/hetero-binary (Bech & Lützen, 1986; Lützen, 1986; von Rosen, 1993). Inspired by Foucault's history of sexuality (Foucault, 1994 [1976]) and American queer theory (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1994; Fuss, 1991; Sedgwick, 1985, 1990; Warner, 1993), I study this period with a particular focus on how Danish citizenship became aligned with heterosexuality through the symbolic othering of the latter's constitutive other, the emerging homosexual figure. I conduct this study through an examination of several male homosexual scandals that shocked Copenhagen's public sphere during the years 1906-11 (Bønnelycke, 2018; von Rosen, 1993). Thus, my primary source material consists of urban newspapers and pamphlets. In my reading of the collected texts, I especially pay attention to how they discussed the emerging male homosexual figure in relation to a number of broader citizenship debates, for instance regarding the right to vote, and how these discussions contributed to the historical hetero-sexualization of Danish citizenship (Nyegaard, 2018, pp. 166-339).

From this point of departure, I draw two major conclusions. First, I conclude that the turn of the 20th century was a period when numerous voices in Copenhagen's public sphere began to align Danish citizenship with heterosexuality. This symbolic alignment came into existence by way of the voices' constant attempts at othering the emerging male homosexual figure as a non-citizen. For instance, they defined him as an alien outsider to the citizenry's national community or as an effeminate criminal unworthy of political rights. By formulating such viewpoints, the voices publicly constituted Danish citizenship as inherently heterosexual (Nyegaard, 2018, pp. 166-269).

Second, I conclude that this heterosexual constitution process did not happen without certain ambivalences and opposing tendencies. Significantly, a few public voices occasionally suggested that the emerging male homosexual figure in principle was a Danish citizen with the civil right to receive a fair and just trial. Likewise, two self-identified homosexual men publicly argued that homosexuals were worthy of full citizen status since they generally conducted themselves just as respectable as any ideal heterosexual citizen. Thus, Copenhagen's public sphere also contained some voices who opposed the dominant tendency to other the emerging male homosexual figure as a non-citizen (Nyegaard, 2018, pp. 270-339).

However, as I emphasize in my dissertation, the significance of these inclusive voices must not be overestimated. Besides being relatively sporadic and few in number, the inclusive voices were also ambivalent because they all rested on inherently heteronormative foundations. An illustrative example of these foundations was their common vision of the male homosexual citizen as an ideally invisible member of society, that is, a citizen who never exhibited his non-normative sexuality to the public. In that way, the inclusive voices made public invisibility or 'being in the closet' an indispensable criterion for homosexual citizenship. Accordingly, the alignment between Danish citizenship and heterosexuality emerged as the most manifest and dominant tendency in Copenhagen's public sphere during the years 1906-11 (Nyegaard, 2018, p. 348).

Against proper objects

Both during and after the writing of my dissertation, I have heard some people describe it as a study of the history of male homosexuality. Such descriptions are of course perfectly true insofar as past constructions of male same-sex desire constitute an important part of my analysis.

Nevertheless, I personally hesitate to describe my dissertation this way. Not because I do not study the history of male

homosexuality – I do so in many ways –, but because I also try to do something more or other than just that. Inspired by Judith Butler’s classic article *Against proper objects* (Butler, 1994), I see this scholarly aspiration as an attempt to write a kind of queer history that consistently refuses to assume a so-called proper study object. At least, I try to refuse the history of male homosexuality as my dissertation’s proper study object in three different ways.

First, I attempt not to limit my analysis to a mere study of the history of male homosexuality. In my dissertation, I do so by moving beyond an examination of the male homosexual figure’s public ‘birth’ and symbolic othering in early-twentieth-century Copenhagen. I also analyze the performative effects of these cultural processes, including their influence on the historical construction of heterosexuality as seemingly normal and natural. In that way, I try not to assume the history of male homosexuality as my proper object of study.

Second, I also attempt to carry out an analysis that refrains from analyzing the history of male homosexuality as an object with no obvious or noticeable relations to other historical fields, like politics or economics. More specifically, I do so by studying how sexuality, both hetero- and homosexuality, historically has become embedded in Danish processes of state and citizenship formation. That is, I examine homo- and heterosexuality as modern constructs that, since their emergence at the turn of the 20th century, have permeated Denmark’s political culture. By doing so, I also seek to refuse the history of male homosexuality as my dissertation’s proper object of study.

Finally, I try to use other theoretical frameworks than those often deployed to study the history of male homosexuality. In my dissertation, I find great intellectual inspiration in the many new theories on citizenship and sexuality that contemporary gender scholars have formulated to analyze the homosexual figure’s recent transformation into an included citizen (e.g. Butler, 2002; Duggan, 2003; Puar, 2007; Warner, 1999; Weeks, 1998). Although these theories in principle only concern themselves with our present-day societies, I also deploy them in my reading of historical texts that originate from early-twentieth-century Denmark. I do so because the theories offer a particularly rich and varied analytical vocabulary for my genealogical study of citizenship and sexuality. My theoretical approach, however, also comes at a certain price. For instance, during the writing of my dissertation, I often had to twist and turn the deployed theories quite a bit in order to make them fit my analytical context and research objectives. Perhaps a queer history writing must be willing to pay such a price when it refuses to assume the history of male homosexuality as its proper study object, also in terms of theoretical frameworks.

It has been both a joyful and an exciting experience to write this kind of history. At the same time, however, I am also keenly aware of the dangers that inhere in such a project. It is never without risk to refuse a proper object for your study, since such an object typically constitutes an authoritative matrix for academic intelligibility. One of the dangers is that you and your academic work become illegible to other scholars.

Against this background, I see the KRAKA Award conferred on my PhD dissertation as a sign that this risk has been worth taking. I see the award as a sign that others too have seen the value of a queer history writing that originated from the refusal to assume a proper object for its study. This makes me very happy and gives me hope of a future in which other Danish gender scholars will initiate further studies from similar queer and inappropriate positions.

Thank you.

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Endnotes

- 1 Notable exceptions to this scholarly tendency include Canaday 2009, Mosse 1985, Surkis 2011.
- 2 The section title is inspired by Dag Heede's review of my dissertation, see Heede 2019.