

Symposium

Exodus, Constitution, and Queer Politics of Laughter

Berlin, June 25/26, 2016

The aim of this symposium is to discuss: What is the current state, and what are future aims of queer politics? How do queer politics relate to and engage with wider societal questions—for example, the economic crisis in Europe, current refugee politics, and precarizations created by armed conflict and the so-called war on terror? We take these questions as challenges to think about queer politics not only as a field defined by topics and issues, but also as a search for cultural forms and modes of political agency.

To pursue this discussion the symposium brings together scholars from the social and political sciences with artists and scholars from the humanities. Transdisciplinarity will allow us to set up and probe the critique of representation as developed in art and cultural theory as a paradigm of subverting the sovereign political subject, thus challenging social and political theory in their understandings of agency and change. Yet, it will simultaneously ask scholars from the humanities to engage with concrete questions of international politics. Last but not least, it will invite a philosophical debate about the understanding of “the political” from a queer theoretical perspective.

The symposium will approach these questions with the help of two recent theoretical tracts from feminist political philosophy, namely Isabell Lorey’s proposal of “presentist democracy” (*States of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, London: Verso, 2015) and Eva von Redecker’s theory of “interstitial change” (*Metalepsis und Revolution. Eine performative Praxisthorie sozialen Wandels*, PhD diss., Humboldt University, 2015). These two nascent perspectives will be put into dialogue with a “feminist classic”: Hélène Cixous’s 1976 essay “Castration or Decapitation?”, *Signs* 7(1), 1981.

Isabell Lorey’s considerations on new democratic answers to precarity and precarization builds on the constitutive power issued by refusal and exodus. Eva von Redecker explores how performative practices may cumulate in a metaleptic dynamic of interstitiality amounting to radical social transformation. As such, these thinkers contribute to debates in political philosophy, while also pushing forward previous discussions on the strategic role of rebellion, dissidence, and subversion in queer and sexual politics. Furthermore, both authors take up and refine theoretical approaches by Judith Butler, Lisa Duggan, and Judith J. Halberstam, as well as other celebrated queer, feminist, and leftist intellectual thinkers. Cixous’s essay “Castration or Decapitation?” presents a concept of the “politics of laughter,” which explicitly points out the subversive potentials, as well as deadly consequences, of laughing.

Putting these three texts into discussion can, we hope, productively intervene in current debates about caricature and censorship. It might also suggest a distinct way of connecting questions of political modality with the demand for and critique of rationality. Relating these questions to the concepts of presentist democracy and interstitial change, we could ask, for instance, whether laughter that arises from grief that accepts its loss and develops into speech and sexual pleasure (Cixous) is or should be thought of as a constitutive part of queer politics? What refusals speak through Cixous’s notion of laughter? What interstitial practices might consolidate in their course? Can the ambivalence of laughter stand in metonymically for the anti-identitarian stance of queer politics and its confounding of hierarchical subject/object dichotomies? Can laughter help elucidate a hinge upon which queer theory turns, rather than demarcating yet another of its “turns” (anti-anti-social, affective, materialist...)?

Antke Engel, Berlin, January 2016