

Demarchy.

Or: Five Demands for a Feminist-Queer Politics

Utta Isop

Utta.isop@uni-klu.ac.at

Animated by a queer ethos, the concept of affirmative and transformative recognition opposes the type of social reality that hierarchically classifies and categorizes people, and that stabilizes this hierarchy through laws, institutions, representations, positions, and so forth. From a queer perspective, hierarchical division and distribution don't appear as unchangeable facts, or as 'natural' realities. Thus, a comprehensive implementation of this ethos will require the deconstruction of categories and hierarchies (as well as their consequences and effects for humans). It will also require those of a 'higher' standing within existing hierarchies to actively reflect and transform their own status.¹

The 2008 "International Queer-Feminist Days" conference in Vienna hosted a workshop entitled "Anarchafeminism—Queer Politics—Solidarity-based Economics." As a participant in this workshop, I proposed a number of possible demands for a queer politics, and put them up for debate. Most of the 40 workshop participants found these demands interesting and thought-provoking. Especially the notion of "demarchy" proved to be stimulating and generative of wide-ranging discussions. Among other things, it was suggested that we abandon the "star principle" by using sortition to select a "person of the week" who should receive our focused attention for this time period. One participant argued that such demands go too far. It is important to register dissent, and to take such critiques seriously.

Containing elements of utopic thought, my five suggestions toward developing demands for a queer politics incorporate the strategies that Antke Engel has termed "de-hierarchization," "de-normalization," and "ambiguification."² In what follows, I will offer a rough sketch of my conceptual framework that is informed by what Gudrun Perko calls a "politics of autonomy," and that I consider to be crucial for the discursive and political project to "abolish the hierarchies that divide societies along the lines of power holders and non-power holders, 'high' and 'low' status groups, enfranchised and disenfranchised people, and so forth."³ The notion of the blurring of identities is at the heart of all five examples of a queer politics. They all emerge out of thought experiments that employ utopic ideas, and that grapple with the question of how to connect various social aspects, how to make them livable without recurring to the trials of identity. For instance, the demand for a global, unconditional basic income for all is being discussed within a number of social movements, and thus constitutes a particularly good opportunity to question the seeming lack of alternatives embedded in current arrangements of power. These kinds of discussions epitomize what Gudrun Perko and Leah Carola Czollek have called the "pleasure of thought/thinking." At the same time, these debates also aim to broaden and diversify the conversation by welcoming different groups within social movements into the fold, and by facilitating exchanges between them. One of the key concepts that my five demands are based on is what I call "gender grassroots democracy."

ONE

Strengthening Demarchy

Traditional types of democratic governance cause voter fatigue, because they systematically create feelings of powerlessness with regard to effecting change through the electoral process. Thus, the concept of gender grassroots democracy proposes to increase the deployment of sortition-based alternatives following John Burnheim's theoretical work on what he terms "demarchy."⁴ This would mean that persons no longer get voted into office based on their identity; instead, they get selected by some form of lottery to hold a given office for a single period. Thus, demarchy creates a situation in which any and all persons can hold any office for one period, without ever having to go through various processes of elimination, and the trials of identity. This helps to prevent the formation of oligarchies, elites, as well as the emergence of systemic-legitimized types of domination within gender groups. For instance, persons with higher levels of education, higher incomes, more property and capital could exert their influence on various committees only indirectly, i.e. through lobbying and the deployment of expert knowledge.

This method would lead to a significant increase in both active and passive electoral rights across all political offices, which would bring those offices much closer to the people's everyday life realities. In contrast to our present system of democratic governance, the requirements for persons who get selected for office by sortition would neither be unrealistically high, nor grotesquely low, since all people would need to be prepared, in concrete terms, to find themselves tomorrow in the very positions where important decisions have to be made. Any complaints about the alienating and distant character of large, centralized administrations would thus lose credibility. It would no longer be necessary to form female elites or to implement a quota system, because the lottery selection process would ensure gender diversity. It would no longer be necessary to justify structural domination within the group of women, because there would no longer be a legitimate mechanism of power that is oriented toward creating gender-based justice.

If the claims of leadership and domination can be minimized, then we can successfully and collectively grapple with the complexity of decision-making processes, which everybody then would be able to comprehend and actively influence as well. Questions of eligibility and the retention of power would no longer be relevant, because every person would have the right to hold any public office exactly once. Due to the fact that decisions would no longer be made by elected officials that are marked by their fixed identity, but by persons selected by lot from amongst the population, there would be significant changes in the ways in which social power operates. That is to say, the entire strategy of creating structures of domination based on rigid identity constructs that are permanently

set against each other, deadlocked in the aggressive play of inclusion and exclusion, would make no sense any more.

TWO

Abolishing Gender Designations in Passports, and Enabling Worldwide, Free Movement of People Without Identity Checks

What is to be preferred is for all humans to be able to 'be' the way they want to, and for all subjects to make autonomous decisions regarding the ways in which they present themselves, name themselves or define themselves, if and whenever they choose...⁵

Following from the insights of queer theory and queer activism, which include the critique of unambiguous, binary gender identities, we should demand that all unambiguous gender designations be removed from passports, ID cards, and administrative data bases. Moreover, since questions of identity and gender identity cannot be separated from cultural contexts, it would seem self-evident that all cultural and national designations should be removed from passports, ID cards, and administrative data bases, as well. But if we eliminate all cultural and national references from passports, ID cards, and administrative data bases, all such documents would be reduced to absurdity. In principle, then, technologies such as fingerprinting could still allow for the control of the worldwide movement of people. But that technology, too, would lead to the creation of identity-based designations by public authorities, who claim the right, and the power, to control people's mobility and their freedom of movement. Ultimately, if this particular demand for a queer politics is to be consistent with the insights of queer theory, it must have as its goal the free, worldwide movement of people that takes place in the absence of any and all identity checks.

THREE

Strengthening the Link Between Part-time Work and Parenting

The idea of acting according to this politics of autonomy is based on the assumption that humans act because they have a political concern (for whatever reasons), and because they want to effect a change of the status quo: for others, as well as for themselves. All this without subscribing to the divisive position that to act for others automatically means to not act for the self.⁶

Through a stronger linking of part-time work and parenting (care) for all, the heteronormative division of labor—part-time work and care for women, full-time work for men—could be abolished. Labor associated with parenting, care, and politics should not be figured as a series of specialized tasks connected to specific social groups, but rather as an important component of everyday life realities and experiences, in which all can participate. Active involvement in parenting or care should not be rooted merely in immediate and personal life circumstances. Instead,

it should be animated by an interest in the other. An increase in the diversity of people's life experiences will facilitate their participation in important social decision-making processes, as well as in the sharing of collective social burdens—while helping to steer clear of the pitfalls of expertocracy.

FOUR

Free Goods and Services of General Interest Without Selection

According to the demands of solidarity-based economics, which were adopted by many current social movements, the public needs to be provided with free goods and services of general interest, such as public spaces for the practice of sexuality, print shops and radio stations that can be used without submitting to identity checks, free accommodation, free food, and so forth. Access to these resources must not be limited through any selection mechanisms whatsoever.

FIVE

Introduction of a Worldwide, Unconditional Basic Income for Every Person Without Means Test, Without Identity Check, and Without Work Requirement

As promoted by BIEN (Basic Income Earth Network)⁷, the introduction of a worldwide, unconditional basic income without means test or work requirement would enable individuals to live a self-determined life and to inhabit a plurality of identities, while eliminating any looming fears of economic sanctions. In the words of BIEN, "[a] basic income is an income unconditionally granted to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement." Until recently, the debate concerning the economic and international dimensions of queer politics has unfortunately been neglected. The introduction of an unconditional basic income without identity check and work requirement would make it possible to minimize the coercive economic forces that generally compel individuals to develop unambiguous gender identities.

Translation: Gerwin Gallob

References:

¹ Perko, Gudrun: *Queer-Theorien. Ethische, politische und logische Dimensionen plural-queeren Denkens*. Cologne: PapyRossa 2005, p. 66

² Engel, Antke: *Wider die Eindeutigkeit. Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus 2002, p. 42.

³ Perko, Gudrun and Leah Carola Czollek (eds.): *Lust am Denken. Queeres im experimentellen Raum jenseits kultureller Verortungen*. Cologne: PapyRossa 2004, p. 42.

⁴ Burnheim, John: *Über Demokratie. Alternativen zum Parlamentarismus*. Berlin: Wagenbach 1985.

⁵ Perko & Czollek 2004, p. 40.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://www.basicincome.org/bien>