

Selling Rainbows: Neoliberal Capitalism and Sexual Identity Formation

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Selling Rainbows

Exploring the formation of queer sexual identity requires understanding how the components of queer culture contribute to the identification process. However, the queer sexual identity formation process is situated within, and in response, to a larger dominant cultural identification process. The dominant culture of the United States is shaped by the economic systems and policies of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal capitalism impacts the construction of queer identity by replicating exclusionary hierarchies of power inherent in capitalism within queer communities and individuals. To explore their impact on queer identity formation, the processes of neoliberalism must be precisely defined and contextualized. To better understand the replication of these hierarchies, the dynamics of identity formation, neoliberal capitalism, and the emergence of queer as a sexual identity and cultural process can be examined as a series of dynamic interrelationships. By understanding the related role and flow of capital across these interrelationships, patterns of oppression, exclusion, and exploitation of youth, people of color, women, gender-nonconforming and trans-people, the disabled, and people of low socio-economic standing across both cultural paradigms emerge.

Towards Identity Construction

Identity formation is both an emergent process of self-discovery and self-identification, as well as a constructed response process to culture. (Cathers, 2017). The process of self-identification is informed by understanding inherent characteristics and drives as fundamental components of personality; the essential, tangible elements of self that an individual is born with. These inherent characteristics shape and influence the development of a self-concept, which describes how an individual comes to view and understand themselves in the world. Self-concept informs the relationship of the self to society, and cultural influences allow the self to further

refine and cohere; culture informs the self-concept through a process of internalizing and conforming to normative cultural values (Aronson & Aronson, 2012). In this way, identity is a product of dynamic relationship between internal and external processes. Inherent identity is an internal product of increasing self-awareness; constructed identity is a product of external cultural shaping and reinforcement within the boundary of a dominant culture.

Sexuality is both inherently discovered, culturally influenced and produced, and a function of personal expression. Sexual orientation, the physical or emotional attraction to a particular gender or gender identity, is considered an inherent process, but the parameters by which an individual may satisfy and express this attraction are culturally defined and influenced (Burnes, 2014). Sexuality, and the individual's relationship to sexuality, is inextricable from an individual's relationship and spatial position within dominant culture, both in terms of the physical spaces an individual inhabits and occupies, but also socially, in the roles and relationships informed by culture and society (Billies, 2015). Culture, then, largely shapes and reinforces the development process of sexual identity.

Understanding sexual identity as both a process of developing self-concept and a process of internalizing cultural construction allows for more meaningful exploration of the complex relationship between culture and identity formation in queer communities. The relationship between culture and identity is important when examining how the dominant culture shapes, forms, reinforces, and replicates elements of its structural characteristics within the process of queer identity formation. Further, this relationship provides a dynamic model which can be applied to the evaluation of queer identity and neoliberal capitalism and their respective roles within individual identity formation and interpersonal relationships.

Specifying Neoliberal Capitalism

Capitalism is a macroscopic economic system that relies on the tension between a supply of products, and corresponding market demand for those products. Supply requires the conversion of energy, materials, resources, labor, and information into some tangible or intangible product or service that can be sold or traded for other forms of energy. Demand, however, refers to the difference between the availability of goods or services, and the societal need for those goods or services. The variance between availability and society need drives demand, while changes in demand drive the availability of supply. The fundamental relationship of capitalism can be described as a dynamic relationship between supply and demand — this relationship is based on an intentional, *structural* imbalance. Inequality is built into the fabric of capitalism because capitalism cannot exist without an imbalance in the distribution and accessibility to resources. Capitalism relies on this sustained inequality, and unequal access and distribution of resources establishes value relationships within the system, which therefore drive commerce. Imbalance and inequality replicate and pervade capitalism's underlying policies, spatial dynamics, relational models, and the processes of identity construction possible within it as an economic system (Rosnay, 1979).

Building on capitalism's dynamic inequality, neoliberal policy glorifies the idea of a pervasive, all-encompassing free-market, and neoliberalism refers to economic and social policies that champion the necessary supremacy of the free market over the rights, freedoms, and needs of the individual. Under neoliberalism, there is an intense imperative to privatize public spaces, institutions, and social programs, and limit the scope and power of the public space (Billies, 2015). Political or economic resistance to this imperative represents an un-negotiable conflict with the free market and with capital itself, demonstrated in hierarchical division in

societies among people and entities who benefit from neoliberal policies and those who suffer under them. Neoliberalism exerts a powerful yet subtle form of dominance and subjugation; it is relentless in its ambition to subsume public spaces that define societies and informs the private spaces that define individuals. This is enacted under the guise and mantra of preserving personal liberty, but only in service of profit generation. The subtle ubiquity of neoliberal dominance creates dialectical complexity in identifying its culpability in social problems that exacerbate class tensions in modern society (Reiche, 1971).

Contextualizing the historical emergence of neoliberal policy allows for more nuanced understanding of how this particular capitalism exacts and operates within public and private spaces. The shift into neoliberalism occurred the late 1970's as a result of widespread international debt crisis, which was paradoxically driven in part by neoliberal trade policies in developing and second-world nations (Grady et al, 2012; Drucker, 2011; Birch, 2012). The policies and ideology of neoliberalism have evolved and accelerated over the last century but originate as far back as the mid 18th century. Initially, neoliberalism fostered the role of the state as agent and producer of public goods and services, with a goal to protect the stability of national economies while stimulating competition in emerging trading markets (Birch, 2012).

The ideology and framework of neoliberalism shifted and gained popularity as a response to “the ascendance of state planning and socialism” after World War I and II (Birch, 2012). The economy of the United States, between the end of World War II and the international debt crisis is generally referred to as the era for Fordist capitalism, which is associated with social and economic policies that favor mass production and consumption (Drucker, 2011). This era of economic policy was characterized by an implied social contract between the public and the private sector; businesses were active participants in their communities (Coontz, 1998). The

policies of neoliberal capitalism are generally associated and defined by rampant deregulation of industry, and the decentralization of import substitution policies with the goal of transforming the economies of dependent nations in Latin and South America, Asia, and Africa to open free markets (Birch, 2012). These policies, which were first implemented in developing nations, were adopted by domestic corporations in the 1970s. This shift led to the dissolution of the social contract between the private and public, as corporations began to exert their political power as corporate citizens.

Public Spaces, Private Lives, Cultural Dominance

The effort to deregulate policy extends beyond the private sector, targeting public institutions, such as education, healthcare and social welfare. The obsessive need to privatize, and thereby, commodify public resources is reflected in a political ideology that promotes civic responsibility rather than civic rights. In other-words, under neoliberalism, the individual becomes solely responsible for their individual freedom, not the state or public (Grady et. al, 2012). The public space is reduced in scope and size relative to desires and need of the free market. The result of this ideology is seen in the reduction or altogether elimination of public resources, and the redistribution of public resources to the private sector (Billies, 2015). Free market practices rooted in preserving inequality are applied to public spaces, subverting the value and role these public institutions play in social life, sabotaging their influence, and limiting their role to the extent by which public spaces, entities, or resources can be directed to drive private profit.

The privatization of public spaces is expressly undertaken to establish desirable market conditions, which in turn drive redevelopment and investment in cities and urban areas, with a goal to further refine and establish these spaces as sites for expansive free market consumption.

(Reiche, 1971) Public spaces, such as parks, universities, and hospitals, are re-imagined to reflect the palette and consumption habits of the normative majority, privatized with the explicit goal of driving profit and reinvestment. The allocation of public resources is done explicitly to drive increased private enterprise. A careful balance between diversity and dominant cultural reinforcement is sought to maximize the commercial and transactional possibilities of these newly imagined spaces (Billies, 2015). This results in public spaces which are less accessible to non-conforming members of society, specifically queer people, and other minorities such as women, youth people of color, gender non-conforming and trans people, and people of lower socio-economic standing.

The impact of privatizing public institutions operates upon the individual by reducing the public, as individuals and resources, to abstract yet “discrete pieces of capital” (Grady et.al, 2012). As an economic model, neoliberalism frames the formation of our lives, identities, and subjectivities (Birch, 2017). Free market ideology, beliefs, and attitudes then inform and emerge as a driving force of identity formation within the dominant culture. The process of establishing identity as a function of capital is representative of the true violence of neoliberal capitalism; it reduces the value and identity of a person to their ability to produce. In doing so, the individual is robbed of their humanity, enslaved to participate in an economic system that actively exploits them.

As a form of capitalism, neoliberalism relies on structural inequality to thrive and propagate. Free market principles, rooted in inequality, dictate trade and social policies, prioritizing privation over public welfare to ensure that people with higher access to available capital will benefit from this inherent inequality. Culturally, and historically, heterosexual white men have claimed the highest access to this privilege and capital, asserting themselves in

positions which dominate women, gender and sexual minorities, class and race minorities, and disability statuses (Lehr, 2008). This power hierarchy in which white heterosexual men inhabit the apex of social and economic power leads to the subsequent categorizing and organizing of non-white, non-male heterosexuals by their otherness, and assigns value to their otherness as a function of their estimated capacity to generate profit within the free market.

The dominance of heterosexual white male power within neoliberalism is important to characterize. One of the direct results of this power structure is racism, which can be defined as a convergence of power and prejudice (Aronson & Aronson, 2012). Prejudices emerge as a result of an individual's cultural deviation from the dominant culture, and punishments for deviation are institutionalized to reinforce these prejudices. This creates a dynamic relationship between racism and the power and influence of the dominant culture. The neoliberal power structure leads to institutional racism, and criminalization of minorities across race, class, gender, age, and sexual identities (Teich, 2012).

The roles and identities of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people are formed and imposed in response to this power hierarchy. Further, this form of hierarchical organizing replicates within the communities that minority groups form. It is therefore impossible to separate the formation of queer identities as distinct or outside the scope of neoliberal capital driven identity creation. As a result of intersections that occur across the wide spectrum of non-white, non-heterosexual, non-male people, fragmentation across gender, racial, class, and sexual identities occurs, replicating the divisions and hierarchical organizing that occurs within neoliberalism (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). These intersectional relationships alone are not powerful enough to mitigate the broader economic context of identity. To understand better the

process of this fragmentation, the process of queer identity formation in response to neoliberalism requires examination.

Tracing Queer

It is important to define the word queer in the context of this examination. The word queer, once used as derogatory slang to describe or accuse someone of being LGBT, was reclaimed by LGBT activists in response to a growing heteronormative LGBT elite that began to form in the early 80s. Queer implies activism, confrontation, and has been adopted by marginalized members across a spectrum of sexual minority communities as well as within pedagogical communities as a framework for complicating and de-naturalizing sexuality (Rand, 2014). Queer can refer to anyone who identifies within a spectrum of non-normative sexual identity and is not limited to LGBT people. There is an implied, even desirable flexibility in the queering process. David Halpern suggests queer is an “identity without an essence”, a signal of a “positionally” relative to the normative standard (as cited in Rand, 2014, p. 30).

For the purposes of this paper, reference to the word “queer” serves as an umbrella for the nearly infinite configuration of sexualized identities that may emerge in response to dominant culture. Queer can refer to sexual orientation and behavior, to cultural expressions of sexuality, and/or to political identity, subjectivity, and awareness (Burnes, 2014). The elasticity of the term implies and references a cultural resilience that informs the more direct and assaultive history of queer communities (Rand, 2014). These communities rallied against police and social convention during the political uprisings associated with Stonewall, and again, in the 80s, as the AIDS epidemic decimated a generation of gay men (Drucker, 2011). Queer emerges from a history of repression and violence that was enacted upon LGBT people by dominant culture and represents a call to action and identity against the imperative normalization of neoliberalism

Dominant culture tends toward conflation, misunderstanding, and falsely equating sexual orientation with sexual identity (Burnes, 2014). Sexual identity, specifically queer identity, is a cultural expression of sexuality, and refers to the strata of social affiliation and memberships individuals form within their respective sexual community; queer identity reflects a highly variant range of non-conforming social, sexual, and relational dynamics (Orne, 2017). While behavior may contribute to the identification process of an individual within the larger queer community, the unique expressions and relationships that emerge from queer communities signify a departure from hetero-normative social and sexual paradigms.

Jason Orne (2017) describes the historical processes that initiated the cultural shift in definition of gay from a sexual orientation to an identity, postulating the formation of queer identity as the end result of a process that was largely driven by political need. Queer people were criminalized on the basis of their sexual behavior throughout the last century, until the U.S. Supreme Court overturned laws that criminalized gay sexual behavior (*Lawrence v Texas*, 2003). The rationale of this ruling changed the definition of homosexuality from a behavior to an identity (Orne, 2017). This change of definition fundamentally changed the cultural formation of queer identities by establishing an assumed cultural parity among queer and non-queer identities. This perception of parity is both inaccurate and dangerous because it undermines queer and its associated identities of their potential for a radical reimagining of a what a more complete inclusive sexual paradigm can incorporate. By nullifying the value of variance, dominant expressions of sexuality retain and reinforce their cultural power and ubiquity.

The relationship between the formation of sexual identity and the cultural sites where this process occurs also requires examination. Queer identities are intricately linked with the emergence of gay neighborhoods and gay bars; the emergence of queer neighborhoods are

themselves linked to the emergence of the Queer Liberation movement of the late 60's and early 70's (Faderman & Timmons, 2006). To understand the nature and significance of these elements within the social relationships that queer identity formation facilitates, the emergence of 'gayborhoods' should first be understood relative to their role within the context of the queer liberation movement.

Gayborhoods are an outcome of the ghettoization of gay people that occurred as the result of cultural and economic oppression queer people faced throughout the last century (Penner, 2017). The formal criminalization of non-conforming sexual behavior is rooted in neoliberal ideology and reinforces concentrations of power and capital within dominant heterosexist paradigms (Reiche, 1971). The resultant stigma and prejudice against non-conforming sexualities and identities led to a cultural pathologizing and criminalizing of queer sexual behavior (Forest, 1995). This process defined queer people as outside desired normative dynamics, a literal and symbolic threat to the reproduction of an obedient and pliant labor force. Queer deviance in this instance resulted in sustained, limited access to economic opportunity and lower cultural privilege for queer people.

As queer liberation emerged as a movement in the early seventies, queer people formed new communities that were inclusive and arguably safer (Pener, 2017). Queer bars maintain a unique place within queer culture as sites of identity formation (Orne, 2017). Bars serve as a welcome mat, attracting and announcing the arrival of queer people who seek to live in proximity with each other. While queer bars serve first and foremost as social institutions, they also facilitate a specific function within the queer community; they are places to find and attract new sexual partners. This function evolves from the need among gay people throughout history to conceal their sexuality. Gay bars, by their nature, allow gay people to connect to each other in

relative safety, facilitating connection that, until the emergence of the internet, was dangerous to conduct outside of designated queer spaces. In this way, the bars are unique in that they are inherently sexualized spaces, offering respite and retreat from a heteronormative world (Stafford 2018). The sexualized energy and potential of gay bars is the underlying characteristic of what defines these spaces as queer.

Jason Orne (2017) explores the impact of sexualized spaces on queer identity formation in his ethnographic study *Boystown*. His premise is that “gayborhoods do not celebrate gay identity, but rather create it” (Orne, 2017, p. 4). The process of this identity creation is initiated and culturally reinforced through the sexual customs and practices that reveal themselves only in these sexualized spaces. Sexual customs and practices are the heart of the cultural reinforcement process that inform how or where queer identities are formed. Gay bars, as a function of gayborhoods, and the sex that happens in these spaces, become a foundational cultural experience. While sex may not be the sole determinant in forming queer identity or communities, the potentiality of sexual connection is a defining characteristic of queer space. Therefore, as cultural experiences, sexual encounters and the spaces they occur in inform and help define the boundaries of queer identity development. These spaces, which originally emerged from a political process in response to discrimination from the dominant power structure, are not immune from replicating the value structures of the dominant culture.

Sex, Commerce, Resistance

As sites of queer identity formation, and as sites of commerce, queer bars are vertically positioned as both an expression and a response to the dominant culture. Further, queer people by virtue of their sexuality or sexual identity are not inoculated from the pervasive influence of the dominant culture, informed by neoliberal policy, within these spaces. The power dynamics of

neoliberalism, informed by race, gender expression, age, ability status, socio-economic status infiltrate the queer bars in a multitude of ways. Orne's (2017) three-year foray into Chicago's queer bars describe the manifestations of social violence and oppression that these intersections replicate within queer bars.

Orne (2017) explores the emergence of a sexual racism that pervades many of the queer bars. In his examination, Orne (2017) found that the less sexualized a queer bar was, the higher the measurable incidence of sexual racism he could document. Sex clubs, for example, seem to be most apt at bridging the social and economic divides that dominant culture bequeaths upon sexual minority communities. Orne (2017) describes a process he defines as the creation of "sexy community" by which queer people, while engaged in sexual behavior, and as a function of public sexual expression, are able to appreciate and celebrate class and racial differences by illuminating these differences (p 55). Difference, he writes, is "sexy when it's allowed to inform appreciation of otherness instead of used in the service of separation (Orne, 2017, p. 77). These sexual experiences cannot be replicated outside the boundaries of queer spaces. But even through the connective and intimate possibilities of sexual behavior, the divisions created by neoliberalism cannot be dissolved; sex, however, offers a way to incorporate these divisions into a queer act of resistance.

Modern queer identity is rooted in an identification process that places gay, lesbian, and trans-people in a milieu where they are equalized in their opposition to the dominant heterosexist culture. This flattening of the individual characteristics of queer people subverts the vibrant and dynamic variety that exists in the sexual expressiveness of queer people, and also lays the foundation for a splintering in queer identities across culturally dominant identities such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status (Drucker, 2011). The resulting reification of dominant

cultural binaries leads to the cultural erasure of the spectrum in which queer people exist. This has the effect of leaving sexual minorities isolated and vulnerable to the advances of the neoliberal agenda. Further, this cultural flattening process conceals the emergence of a neoliberal variant of queer person who, through intersectional access of the privileges of white, male, or other upwardly mobile characteristics, exists in opposition to radical queer identities and objectives.

Queer bars across the country, however, are disappearing rapidly for a confluence of reasons. Their disappearance represents a threat to the cohesion of queer identity, an existential crisis that is only now emerging. Orne (2017) points to the 2003 Supreme Court ruling as a significant point of departure in the development of this new queer identity, which seeks congruence with the neoliberal agenda. Orne (2017) labels these individuals as “Post Queer.” This identity, which seeks to equate homosexual and heterosexual sexual identities is dismissive and inherently oppressive to queer sexuality. Similar to the manner by which neoliberal economic policies subsume public spaces, the post queer identity seeks to subsume the activism and deviance of the queer identity and replace it with a marketable, socially acceptable variant of queer culture that reinforces, rather than opposes the dominant culture.

The emergence of the Post Queer identity paves a cultural path to the emergence of a new wave of gentrification that is currently occurring throughout gay neighborhoods. Orne (2017) describes this next wave of gentrification as being driven primarily by a process he refers to as heritage commodification. Heritage commodification is part of a larger phenomenon of secondary gentrification occurring within gay neighborhoods and is largely propelled by deliberately de-sexualizing queer spaces in order to monetize the cultural history of gayborhoods. Doing so makes these spaces accessible to non-queer people. Attempts to preserve

queer elements of the neighborhood as exotic are undertaken with the goal of selling goods, services, and the neighborhood itself to tourists and higher SES families who seek out these neighborhoods. The commodification of sites of queer identity formation is a direct outcome of neoliberalism (Stafford, 2018).

Stafford also explores the social issues exposed as gay neighborhoods change and are commodified; namely, the disappearance of critical social services that disproportionately are relied on by queer and trans youth of color. Stafford (2018) states it is marginalized members of queer culture that are excluded from the new spaces. The disappearance of social services represents one of the most damaging impacts of the collision between the neoliberal free market and minority communities. Trans and gender non-conforming queer youth of color represent one of the most at risk populations within the queer community; as highly intersectional members of the queer community, they are marginalized by their status as queer people, as people of color, as gender non-conforming, and as young people (Teich, 2012).

Within the framework of neoliberalism, youth in particular are deprived of one of the central tenets required of a functional democracy: agency. Agency is the ability to advocate on one's own behalf (Burnes, 2014). In neoliberal economies, youth are entirely dependent on their parents or legal guardians for financial support. Conversely, parents have no legal obligation to execute this responsibility, and queer youth are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from families who do not accept them; the rate of homeless queer youth is substantially higher than that of non-queer youth. The lack of legal repercussion for parents of queer youth further undermines their already limited ability to exert agency within neoliberal frameworks (Lehr, 2008). The rate of queer homelessness increases across intersectional lines of gender, class, ability status, and gender expression and often leads to the exploitation of youth as sex workers (Teich, 2012). The

lack of legal and financial agency of youth makes them particularly vulnerable to the social violence of neoliberal society, compounded by the disappearance and erosion of safe and accessible queer spaces and services.

On Preservation

In understanding the functions and pathology of neoliberal policy, identifying its pervasive and violent role within the identification processes of queer communities can inform resistance strategies imperative to their survival. In all of the research encountered to prepare this paper, a common theme emerged by which the ability to resist is fundamentally limited to an individual's ability to exist and operate with agency and awareness within the larger, culturally dominant system. To preserve queer as a culture of resistance, it is critical to understand how the mechanics of neoliberalism actively operate to subvert the queer community and embrace the intersectional alliances that allow queer people to subvert neoliberal hegemony by blurring and disrupting dominant cultural binaries. Recognizing the social justice implications this process initiates is an important step in mitigating the exclusion and economic violence that arise when the interests of marginalized people cross paths with the limitless appetite of capitalism. Further, understanding how this process is linked inextricably to the negation of queer sexuality can provide meaningful next steps toward better recognizing and preserving queer spaces as sites of identity formation, social justice, resistance, and critical incubator of unique and potently queer sexual identities.

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