Sexualities

'When one doesn't even exist': Europeanization, trans* subjectivities, and agency in Cyprus

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Abstract

In the context of Europeanization, transnational LGBTI rights and politics discourses and paradigms interact with local ones. However, the effects of this interaction on trans* people in the margins of 'Europe' have received little attention. Drawing from participant observation and interviews with trans* respondents, I examine how trans* subjectivities and politics in Cyprus are shaped amidst this process. I show that institutional responses to trans* claims reinforce trans* marginalization. I find that trans* people are marginalized in, and disappointed by the normalization of, the (trans)national LGBTI movement. I argue that these factors induce alternative modes of everyday trans* politics and community organizing outside NGO structures. Therefore, this article helps decenter trans* studies' typical focus on Western Europe, North America, and Australasia, while offering an analysis of the role of Europeanization in Cypriot LGBTI politics.

Keywords

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The effects of the Europeanization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*,[1] and intersex (LGBTI) human rights discourses and activism paradigms on national LGBTI communities have been extensively discussed (e.g. Ayoub, 2013, 2015, 2016; Bilić, 2016; Brković, 2014; Rexhepi, 2016; Slootmaeckers and Touquet, 2016; Swimelar, 2016).[2] Nonetheless, these effects on trans* people and politics in the margins of 'Europe' have received less attention (e.g. Balzer and Hutta, 2014; Kuhar et al., 2018).[3]

To address this gap, I examine trans* people and politics in Cyprus, where local and transnational discourses and activism paradigms unfold, and I investigate the following questions: How do national and transnational discourses about gender nonconformity interact in the context of Europeanization? What is this interaction's impact on trans* subjectivity and politics?[4]

Theoretically, the article draws from the insights of trans*, LGBT, Europeanization, and movements studies.[5] Drawing from participant observation and in-depth interviews with trans* respondents, I demonstrate that institutional responses to trans* claims – which are adopted in an attempt to fulfill human rights obligations that ensue from Cyprus's European Union (EU) membership, yet short of establishing a national trans* legal and policy framework – exacerbate trans* marginalization. Nonetheless, I find that, combined with the disappointment in the (trans)national LGBTI movement's normalization, they induce the formation of alternative, everyday modes of trans* politics. Therefore, I argue that the lack of a trans* legal and policy framework, trans* peoples' marginalization in the (trans)national LGBTI movement, and their disappointment in its normalization, stimulate everyday trans* emancipatory political action and community organizing outside normative NGO structures. In offering a perspective on everyday trans* politics in Cyprus, this analysis contributes to the decentering of trans* studies' typical focus on Western Europe, North America, and Australasia, and offers an analysis of Europeanization's role in Cypriot LGBTI politics.

Political dynamics of the Europeanization of LGBTI rights and politics

The literature is divided on the impact of LGBTI rights discourses and activism paradigms' Europeanization/transnationalization, particularly in national contexts where historical legacies have led to narrow conceptualizations of the political and reinforced notions of privilege and exclusion based on gender and sexual identities (e.g. Kamenou, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2019; Kumari, 2018; Mole, 2016). It has been argued that Europeanization and EU admission, or its prospect, have promoted the recognition and protection of LGBTI rights at the national level (Slootmaeckers and Touquet, 2016). Moreover, despite complexities and the stalling involved in the Europeanization of LGBTI issues, which often relate to national context particularities, the fundamental rights multilevel protection system in Europe has enhanced political opportunities for national and transnational mobilization around sexual and gender equality under the umbrella of transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are assisting activists in advancing their cause at the national level through Brussels (Ayoub, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2019; Ayoub and Paternotte, 2014; Bolzendahl and Gracheva, 2018; Mole, 2016; Swimelar, 2016).

Others stress Europeanization's limitations in effecting sociocultural change through legal changes and negative impact on grassroots agency, especially in countries outside the EU core. As the argument goes, Europeanization is not a linear process toward progress and serves to mask the major 'west' European powers' colonial legacy. By citing the mushrooming of transnational LGBTI NGOs, these powers legitimate their self-assigned role as saviors of repressed minorities in 'backward' cultures, whom they leave devoid of agency (Bilić, 2016; Rahman, 2014; Renkin, 2016; Rexhepi, 2016; Sadurní et al., 2017).[6]

There are merits in both positions and they can be seen as complementary, as they are based on different interpretations of how local LGBTI politics are shaped in the context of

Europeanization. For example, far from presenting Europeanization as panacea for LGBTI inequality, Ayoub (2015, 2016) notes variation in the achievement of LGBTI minorities' legal recognition between and across core and non-core EU countries. Ayoub acknowledges state hierarchies' effects on LGBTI politics and LGBTI human rights discourses' employment in 'homonationalist' (Puar, 2007, 2013) projects. Nonetheless, the author offers a nuanced explanation of the relationship between domestic and transnational LGBTI activism that cannot be reduced to one of domination. Ayoub does not annihilate local actors' agency and argues that 'transnationally connected domestic groups … selectively use and adopt foreign ideas to local traditions and practices, performing as brokers between international and domestic norms' (Ayoub, 2015: 311), because 'Europeanization can at least sometimes be seen as self-reflection and internal learning, not external imposition' (Ayoub, 2016: 47).

Bilić (2016), for example, also problematizes 'Europe' as panacea for LGBTI inequality and sees Europeanization as a dynamic process in which ways of governing and being governed are constantly contested (Bilić, 2016: 6). However, the author finds more ground in arguments that see this process – and the ensuing LGBTI politics – as one that uncritically emulates 'Western models while ignoring, misinterpreting, or effectively remaining disengaged from local grievances' (Bilić, 2016: 12). Therefore, Europeanization 'reflects, refracts, and reproduces long-standing asymmetries and power differentials', between core and non-core EU countries and within non-core EU contexts (Bilić, 2016: 6). This approach does not annihilate local actors' agency either but, in treating it as a set of collective but internally heterogenous, divergent, and conflicting struggles for social change, it places more emphasis on its implication in the perpetuation of power differentials and the depoliticization of non-normative identities, than on its role in eliminating these differentials

and enabling multiple and complex identities and subjectivities (Bilić, 2016: 8; Brković, 2014; Butterfield, 2016; Rexhepi, 2016).

Despite these analyses' important contributions, research on the processes through which trans* marginalization is entrenched and resisted in the context of Europeanization remains limited. Even scarcer is such research that focuses on trans* people in contexts in the margins of 'Europe', and particularly in the Southern European context. This allows the contradictions of Europeanization in relation to exclusion, which are most prominent in the EU's margins (Arat-Koç, 2010), to remain obscured.

Empirical research with trans* people outside the 'west' and the EU core allows us to shift the focus of, and reframe some of the questions raised in, analyses of trans* subjectivities and politics, in ways that empower trans* research participants and address intersectional aspects of lived realities (Moss, 2014: 213; Namaste, 2005: 10). Such a shift of focus is necessary for decolonizing trans* studies and politics and interrogating the asymmetries of Europeanization, transnationalization, and globalization (Aizura et al., 2014: 314). By understanding and examining discursive practices, subjectivity formation, and political agency as sets of often internally heterogenous and conflicting processes, this analysis enables the unearthing of alternative emancipatory trans* political action that becomes possible by the space that opens up when national and transnational rights discourses and activism paradigms merge, cross, or collude in the context of Europeanization.[7] Thus, it adds to the body of trans*, LGBT, movements, and Europeanization scholarship.

In this article, 'Europeanization' is defined as a transnationalization process that includes the emergence and development of European-level governance structures and institutions, collective ideas, norms, and values (e.g. Ayoub, 2013; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003). It is employed to denote 'a set of regional economic, institutional, and ideational

forces of change also affecting national policies, practices, and politics' (Schmidt, 2002: 41).

However, its outcomes are nonfixed, contingent, and complex. As the discussion of the case

of Cyprus will corroborate, Europeanization processes initiated from above and below may

both emasculate and reinforce notions of privilege and exclusion based on gender and sexual

identities. This is particularly the case in contexts marked by tensions with European identity

and belonging and about what an 'authentic' national identity entails, including in relation to

gender and sexuality (Brković, 2014; Butterfield, 2016; Kamenou, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2019;

Rexhepi, 2016).

The case of Cyprus

Nationalism is inherently built upon imposed coherence, systematic exclusions, and gender-

binary conceptions of identity (Kumari, 2018; Mole, 2016). Nationalistic discourses tend to

enjoy more appeal in postcolonial, ethnically divided, and conflict-ridden contexts, like

Cyprus, where the stakes of a widely shared, gender-essentialist national identity are

particularly high. Cyprus's historic turns – and the British colonizers' discourses that fueled

interethnic hatred and nationalism and, for the first time, delegitimized sexual and gender

nonconformity – have rendered cisgenderism as the sine qua non of the nation's unity against

internal and external enemies, while cisgenderism's privileging has underpinned legal,

political, social, economic, and cultural mechanisms of lives' regulation and hierarchization.

Within this context, gender and sexuality nonconformity continue to be perceived as a threat

to the nation's norms and values by a substantial segment of the institutional and political

elite, and by some parts of society (Kamenou, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2019).

The admission of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) to the EU in 2004 has facilitated

some degree of LGBTI human rights norm diffusion and some legal changes. Nevertheless,

changes in policy, discourse, and behavior remain limited as, to a considerable extent, state-

initiated changes continue to be treated as tactical concessions in the process of trying to

strike a balance between LGBTI-friendly internal and external actors, and LGBTI-hostile

internal actors (Kamenou, 2011, 2012, 2016). Such changes are also inhibited by the fact that

the country's EU admission and Europeanization discourses have reinforced existing

hierarchical dichotomies and exclusionary discourses – including homonationalist discourses

(Puar, 2007, 2013) – across and within ethnic lines. 'Europe and the 'west' become sites of

LGBTI identity struggle, in which the 'non-European/non-western' gender- and sexuality-

nonconforming other is articulated as a threat to the nation and its 'Europeanness' (Kamenou,

2011, 2012, 2016, 2019; Paternotte, 2018; Puar, 2007, 2013; Rexhepi, 2016; Sadurní et al.,

2017). Namely, some Cypriot LGBTIs reproduce nationalist and essentialist conceptions of

gender and sexuality and exclusionary and imperialist conceptions of 'Europeanness' that

render other LGBTIs as inferior (Kamenou 2012, 2019). A brief overview of the

development and politics of the Greek-Cypriot LGBTI movement in the context of Cyprus's

EU admission and Europeanization helps contextualize and substantiate this argument.

     In Cyprus, the legacies of colonialism and ethnonational conflict have led to a narrow

conceptualization of the political, as nationalism became the central element of the country's

political life, leaving little space for discussions on issues other than the national problem –

including gender and sexuality nonconformity – that have been rendered as less politically

important, if not as apolitical.[8] The Greek-Cypriot LGBTI movement has its roots in the

Cypriot Gay Liberation Movement, created in 1987 by Alecos Modinos. Due to the

nationalistic and LGBTI-hostile environment that impeded collective mobilization, using his

ties to the political elite, Modinos lobbied for the decriminalization of same-sex sexual

conduct. Since no political party was willing to support his cause, he turned to the European

Court of Human Rights (ECHR) that decided in his favor in 1993. Not decriminalizing same-

sex sexual contact could not be avoided, since the Council of Europe had warned the RoC

that non-abidance with the ECHR ruling would mean expulsion and jeopardize the

enforcement of a 1996 ruling on the issue of the Turkish intervention and occupation.

Consequently, in 1998, the Cypriot parliament was forced to decriminalize same-sex sexual

contact amidst fierce opposition by the Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Kamenou, 2011, 2012,

2016).

After the late 1990s, LGBTI issues were again overshadowed by the national problem

and banished from public dialogue. However, EU admission – formal negotiations for which

began in March 1998 – and Europeanization – certain processes of which began in 1990,

when the RoC applied for full EU membership (Sepos, 2008) – enabled civil society

mobilization and affected changes in political opportunity structures (Helfferich and Kolb,

2001; Marks and McAdam, 1999). These changes facilitated the formation on a new LGBTI

organization in 2009 – Accept-LGBTI Cyprus (Accept) – by a small group of young

Cypriots. Accept's vision is 'the formation of a society … free from discrimination and

prejudice in particular as regards to … sexual orientation.'[9] Its mission includes 'the

implementation of policies, laws, programs and jurisprudence of the European Union and the

Council of Europe … especially regarding sexual orientation and social gender' and 'the

recognition of equal marriage, adoption, inheritance rights, insurance, health and other needs,

for all citizens of Cypriot society'.[10]

Changes in political opportunity structures enabled Accept to push for LGBTI rights.

However, this has been far from a smooth process. For example, in an unprecedented way, in

2010, the Ministry of Interior requested the recommendations of the church and of four other

ministries before approving Accept's request to register as an NGO (Kamenou, 2012).

Another example relates to LGBTI legislation. Trying to prevent the church from boycotting

the same-sex civil partnership bill, in June 2014, Accept's president met with a church

delegation. During this meeting – which the author also attended – in exchange for not

boycotting the bill, the church delegation asked for assurances that Accept would not push for

adoption for same-sex couples or for any trans* rights.

Manipulating the RoC's inability to completely ignore LGBTI rights claims – due to

its EU-membership ensuing responsibilities – whilst recognizing that the degree and mode of

satisfaction of such claims depends on the pressure LGBTI-hostile actors exert on the state,

Accept adopted an elite-targeting approach and pushed for minimal threshold LBGTI legal

recognition. Through this politics and the employment of discourses and practices promoted

by EU institutions and transnational LGBTI NGOs, which find their way into local

ideological and practical repertoires due to EU admission and Europeanization processes, it

has been successful at achieving recognition of same-sex civil partnerships and adoption of

hate speech and crime legislation in 2015. Nevertheless, as the analysis section will

demonstrate, this approach of compartmentalized and NGO activism has been limiting

Accept's ability to engage with issues of intersectional marginalization and exacerbating in-

group exclusions, particularly against gender-nonconforming people.

Within the Cypriot context where nationalism prevails, Europeanization's norms and

values are selectively and procrastinatingly incorporated in national law and policy, and EU

admission and Europeanization discourses are employed in ways that reinforce existing

notions of privilege and exclusion, trans*-specific laws and policies are yet to be

implemented. Even though in January 2018 the RoC president promised that a draft bill on

gender identity recognition would be immediately forwarded to the RoC law office for

technical examination (Accept-LGBTI Cyprus, 2018), complaints by trans* people continue

to be partially and selectively addressed through ad hoc and impromptu institutional

responses, on a case-by-case basis. It should be noted that the draft bill contains no trans*

health care provisions. As a former president of Accept who has been involved in the

negotiation of the draft bill reported, the Ministry of Justice and Public Order refuses to

acknowledge links between gender identity legal recognition and other trans* rights, even though trans* people are expected to undergo medical interventions in order to stand a chance of having their official documents changed.[11]

Some Accept founders had raised the issue of the organization's stance on gender nonconformity. However, concerns about Accept's public image within an LGBTI-hostile context and some of its members' disdain toward binary gender identity transgression led Accept to prioritize assimilation over freedom, thus contributing to rendering cisgenderism as privilege (Kamenou 2012). Nevertheless, after the success of the first Pride in 2014, the aforementioned Accept founders took initiative for the recruitment of gender-nonconforming members and supported them in establishing the Accept-LGBTI Cyprus Trans Working Group (TWG) in 2015. As one of individuals who was involved in this process reported, the TWG was formed to represent Accept's gender-nonconforming members and bring to its attention issues important to the trans* community.[12] Working within its mandate, the TWG prepared reports that collate existing information about the status of trans* people in Cyprus. One of the reports states:

> It would appear – unofficially, at least – that the Interior Ministry … will permit the name and gender marker change of trans-identified RoC citizens if they have … a letter from a psychiatrist confirming a diagnosis of gender dysphoria … written confirmation by an endocrinologist that the applicant is receiving monitored hormone therapy [and] … surgeons' letters attesting to the irreversible surgeries for … individuals to "fit" their bodies closer to the traditionally perceived gender "binary" (Accept-LGBTI Cyprus Trans Working Group, 2017).

What stems from these reports – and from the presentation of this study's findings that follows – is that although there is no relevant law or policy in place, the possibility of such

document changes is premised on the acceptance and embodiment of medicalized and

pathologizing binary discourses of transness.

Methods

The data for this article comes from an ethnographic project in Cyprus that investigates how

trans* marginalization is entrenched and resisted in the context of Europeanization, based on

trans* individuals' perspectives.[13] The employed trans*-centered approach (Namaste, 2000,

2005, 2012, 2015) enabled me to investigate the various aspects of trans* subjectivity and

political agency, thus offering a sustained analysis of trans* people's everyday life, politics,

and resistance beyond normativized NGO structures (Namaste, 2005: ix-x).

A trans*-centered approach places trans* people and their accounts, experiences,

wants, and needs at the center of the research activity. In doing so, it enables them to

influence the knowledge base of the topic under investigation. It aims to deal with unequal

power relations between the researcher and the research participant and between cisgender

and trans* individuals within and beyond the research context, and to produce findings that

are meaningful to trans* communities. Furthermore, by not treating trans* people as a

homogenous category, it reveals the complexity and multidimensionality of participants'

sociopolitical realities. Therefore, this approach is responsive to the concerns of trans* people

who have been subjugated and colonized by ciscentric analyses of identity and politics and

lesbian/gay-centered analyses of nonconformity and political mobilization (Namaste, 2012:

94-98).

Moreover, this approach necessitates and facilitates critical reflection on the part of

the researcher in relation to their positionality, as this is affected by their gender identification

and employed theoretical conventions and conceptual frameworks, which may be silent on

the matters of colonialism and imperialism (Namaste, 2005: xi). Acknowledging this silence,

through the employment of a trans*-centered approach in the collection and analysis of the

data, this article aims to contribute to the decolonization of 'trans*' by noting and challenging

the workings of colonialism and imperialism, as these become evident in the participants'

stories (Namaste, 2000, 2005, 2012, 2015).

An imperative question remains though: How to decolonize the current imaginary of

what it means to be trans* when decolonization 'always already incorporates the language of

the imperial gaze' (Aizura et al., 2014: 311)? What makes good scientific inquiry is being

attentive to the different ways available of knowing. In making its biases part of its argument

and study, scholarship may decipher how and why certain truths are established, while being

mindful that the researcher cannot stand above this reflexive process (Lather, 1988).

The fieldwork was conducted from May to December 2016. I conducted 22 in-depth

interviews with gender-nonconforming individuals to understand their experiences and

perspectives. To recruit interviewees, I used a snowball sampling method that began with

personal networks. A spread of participants was sought and achieved, and a summary of

participants' characteristics can be found in Table 1. In the current analysis, all participants

are quoted only by fake initials to maintain anonymity and confidentiality and ensure their

nonidentification.

[Table 1 about here]

Participants were interviewed in the language felt most comfortable to them: Greek or

English. I conducted the interviews in person. They lasted from one to three hours and

addressed participants' experiences as gender-nonconforming people, engagement with

institutions, and views about the national and transnational LGBTI movement. They were

structured as conversations and broad open-ended questions were asked to enable detailed

accounts (Riessman, 2008). All interviews were audio-recorded upon participants' agreement

and were later transcribed verbatim. The interviews conducted in Greek were translated into

English after being transcribed.

An anonymous mixed questionnaire was distributed to participants before the interviews and they were given the choice of completing it in Greek or English. Besides providing descriptive information about the participants, questionnaire responses aided in the refinement of the interview questions. Fieldwork also involved participant observation in the form of attendance of five three-hour meetings of the TWG, in which 10 of the 22 interviewees participated. The meeting discussions helped in identifying themes to explore in individual interviews, especially around participants' attitudes toward institutional practices, LGBTI NGO politics, and alternative trans* politics.

I analyzed the transcripts manually to identify key themes and recurrent ideas and used thematic narrative analysis to capture how participants define and construct their experiences. I employed the narrative analysis approach as it is appropriate for research that aims to include participants' voices while examining the workings of power, gendered subjectivities, and political agency (Orbuch, 1997; Riessman, 2008).

Four themes emerged from coding the data: trans* marginalization through institutional responses to trans* claims; gender identifications as belonging and resistance; alternative oppositional trans* communities; and everyday dissidence as political agency. I selected interview excerpts as exemplars of each of these themes.

Trans* marginalization through institutional responses to trans* claims

In Cyprus, trans* exclusion is reinforced within a legal and policy vacuum through ad hoc institutional responses to trans* claims. Although aimed at accommodating such claims – an obligation that stems from EU membership – they further pathologize and render nonnormative gender existence as morally, culturally, socially, politically, and legally illegitimate. Commenting on their experiences of marginalization, a trans* participant reported: 'I can't do anything that requires showing one's national identification card. I can't

go to a bank, I can't travel, I can't even vote. … I'm not just not a citizen. I don't even count

as a human being' (BQ). On the same subject, another participant stated:

We aren't just stripped off our basic human rights. What's worse is that this situation

[i.e. non-legal recognition] makes us dependent on people who may hurt us, push us

even deeper into the margin, while throwing us crumbs of pity. … This might be

better than nothing, but it's not recognition, or respect, or being [treated as] a human

being of equal worth (QJ).

As these interview excerpts demonstrate, ad hoc institutional responses to trans*

claims are allowances to those classified as less-than-human that exacerbate their

marginalization. Within a trans* legal and policy vacuum, institutionally secured gender-

identity-based sociocultural norms of marginalization become regulatory of gender-

nonconforming personhood and exclude it from the notions of citizenship, national

belonging, and humanness that continue to be conflated with cisnormativity. The lack of, and

procrastination in establishing, a trans* national legal and policy framework and the ensuing

impromptu and selective responses to trans* issues place trans* individuals in a state of

limbo, in which their fate depends on the discretion of individual public servants and health

and service providers (Namaste, 2005: 3). As a TWG member reported, 'Every time we try to

help someone … the process is different. … It depends on … whether those who get to

decide feel sorry for them' (CF). Another participant explained: 'This is exactly the

irrationality… In order to get my documents changed, I needed to undergo medical

interventions of all sorts, even though there is no law about getting one's documents

changed' (PA).

As abject beings (Butler, 1993), trans* people may stand a change of having some of

their needs accommodated by institutional structures only partially and selectively through

charity-like, case-by-case, ad hoc, and impromptu institutional practices. Furthermore, in

light of the lack of national trans* legislation and policy that would equally apply to

everyone, such practices accentuate class, social capital, and other inequalities among trans*

people. As a participant explained:

> I'm in a privileged position having changed my official documents. … I'm the only
>
> one from the [trans*] people having had that many surgical interventions. … I'd say
>
> [these cost] about 12,000 or 13,000 euros in total. … There is probably not going to
>
> be a good chance of [other trans* people] getting their papers changed (MT).

Identity articulations to gain access to some of the resources and privileges that stem from

legal recognition may violate trans* peoples' sense of self and result into the construction of

a transnormativity that is premised on, and conditioned by, the solidification of structural

inequalities and normative configurations of gender, embodiment, and identity (Currah and

Moore, 2009; Spade, 2011, 2015). As one of the aforementioned participants explained,

'Personally, I don't care about identities. … I wouldn't even care about getting my

documents changed if I had a job or didn't need one' (PA).

When gender nonconformity is detached from the generic 'LGBTI' acronym and

examined in its own right, the limitations inherent in neoliberal notions of identity, rights, and

equality become evident. For example, in relation to the employment of the concepts 'sexual

orientation' and 'gender identity' in international human rights discourses, it has been argued

that they instill a distinctive gender and sexuality matrix that could potentially function as a

reconfiguration of what Judith Butler (1990: 151) calls the 'heterosexual matrix'. They

continue to be subject to dominant interpretations that privilege the gender binarism status

quo, naturalize bodies, genders, and desires, and ignore the ways in which gender and

sexuality are intertwined with social structures, subjectivity, and identification (McGill, 2014;

Waites, 2009). Furthermore, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts, discourses of human

rights aiming to tackle trans* invisibility and exclusion often create new forms of invisibility

and exclusion of gender-nonconforming people (Gramling and Dutta, 2016: 348; Pons Rabasa, 2016). However, as the remainder of this analysis will demonstrate, this may stimulate trans* emancipatory political action beyond the confines of normative LGBTI NGO politics.

Gender identifications as belonging and resistance

Naming functions as a tool of identification, categorization, and negation in ways that (re)produce, but also challenge, ideas about gendered identities (Platero, 2011). Some participants reported using names and gender identifications to disrupt gender binarism and fixity. For example, an interviewee explained: 'I identify as a man. … I see the importance of 'trans*' … so I don't reject it. I'm a man but also a trans* man in certain circumstances. … Names and labels are trivial to me' (EK). The simultaneous employment of normative and resistance discourses exemplified in this interview excerpt, which the lack of a national trans* legal and policy framework makes perhaps easier, shows that gender-nonconforming people are not always or only seeking gender stability, but 'a corposubjectivation that allows one to live a livable life, negotiated and contested in tension with … normativity' (Pons Rabasa, 2016: 405).

Some other participants described embracing gender identities that are not always intelligible to them as a way of belonging to a community. Indicatively, a participant said:

It's not that … I have any problem using it [i.e. the term 'trans*'], but it doesn't really make sense to me. In a way, it doesn't cover me. I was who I am before the trans* label came to Cyprus and became popular. … Before … I would say 'I'm a woman'. Now I say 'I'm a trans* woman'. … I like the fact that, now, we have a small family (ZD).

The popularity and employment of the term 'trans*' emerge from the Anglo-American lesbian and gay community. However, research has demonstrated that this discourse does not

make sense to gender-nonconforming people who do not understand their lives, needs, and

political struggles based on the terms and within the confines of the lesbian/gay framework

(Aizura et al., 2014; Namaste, 2000, 2005, 2015). Research has also demonstrated that the

universalization of 'trans*' by transnational NGOs as an umbrella term in

European/transnational human rights discourses subsumes local understandings and

expressions of trans* existence, identities, and politics, while leaving unquestioned the

structural conditions within which the term functions (Dutta and Roy, 2014; Hok-Sze Leung,

2016). As the interview excerpt above demonstrates, outside the 'west', the idea of 'trans*'

may not be culturally intelligible, but because of the lack or inaccessibility of knowledges

about precolonial concepts of gender, the facility of accessing 'western' discourse, and the

power differentials between the 'west' and the 'rest', trans* identities may be assumed as a

means of convenience and as somewhere to belong (Gramling and Dutta, 2016: 339-340;

Roen, 2001: 258-259).

Furthermore, contrary to predominant transnormative discourses, trans* people in

Cyprus seem to be more interested in achieving imperceptibility than the 'outness' the

neoliberal paradigm of LGBTI politics dictates (Crawford, 2008; Green, 2006).[14] As an

interviewee explained:

> I want to exist, not like being invisible and hiding, but not to be that much noticed …
>
> Why should I have to be 'out and proud' … in order to have a decent life? I'd like to
>
> be able to just be, with this face, with this body, with this voice, like all humans are
>
> (LR).

Another participant stated:

> I'm not interested in this [i.e. being involved in LGBTI NGOs' activities]. Mobilizing
>
> to get a label [i.e. 'trans*'] recognized … will not make my or other trans*

individuals' problems disappear. … I'd rather invest my time and energy on trans*

peoples' real problems (SA).

Decolonizing trans* necessitates that gender-nonconforming practices, embodiments, and

ways of being – politically, socially, and culturally – are understood 'in their geographic and

cultural specificity and not simply as a local instance of a falsely universalized "transgender"'

(Aizura et al., 2014: 314). What these interview excerpts demonstrate is a longing for

normality in one's own existence outside and beyond essentialized legal, social, and political

trans* identities. This is a call for normality as belonging, as opposed to normality as

conformity to the cisnormativity and transnormativity that law and identity politics are based

on and reproduce (Gramling and Dutta, 2016: 341). It is a shift away from, and in opposition

to, the embodiment of gender polarization and mainstream normative LGBTI politics as

prerequisites for trans* political practice. This shift creates opportunities for the formation of

alternative gender-nonconformity communities and everyday trans* politics outside the

'human rights industrial complex' (Puar, 2013: 338) and the neoliberal paradigm of LGBTI

politics.[15]

Alternative oppositional trans* communities

TWG's activities signal a growth of trans* activism in Cyprus. Nonetheless, this is limited

because trans* people remain marginalized in the national LGBTI movement. Another TWG

member explained:

They [i.e. LGB members] look down on us. … A lesbian who is on the Board once

told me I'm not really a trans* man but a lesbian in confusion. … Another time, a gay

guy told me we keep them back from achieving their goals, as if their goals matter

and ours don't. … I'm going to leave the group if they don't let us be autonomous

(BQ).

Collective identity construction in movements – including sexuality and gender movements –

is gendered (Gamson, 1997). Based on participants' comments, it seems that, despite its

important achievements, Accept is primarily a cisgendered organization, while gender

binarism informs some of its members' approaches to LGBTI politics.

Other reasons for trans* people's alienation from the national LGBTI movement

participants identified are its prioritization of legal rights recognition following the paradigm

of transnational LGBTI NGOs and its increasing institutionalization, professionalization, and

NGOization.[16] An interviewee said:

> [Political elites] … remind us how much they did for same-sex civil partnerships, as if
>
> this does anything. … I have a friend who was repeatedly beaten up by his family and
>
> kicked out of the house for being trans*. … Some people say the LGBTI organization
>
> doesn't represent them. … Maybe we are better off being on our own as a group (TF).

Analyses have exposed the negative impact of LGBTI movements' prioritization of achieving

marriage equality on their politics (e.g. DeFilippis et al., 2018; Duggan and Hunter, 2006;

George, 2018). As the excerpt above illustrates, the Cypriot LGBTI movement's

prioritization of same-sex civil partnerships recognition has left many of its members feeling

that it is not tackling substantive issues that affect their everyday lives, and invests valuable

resources into securing legal rights that benefit only its lesbian and gay members.

It has been argued that the progressive NGOization and professionalization of

movements has caused a shift in the realm of activism into the 'non-profit industrial complex'

(Rodriguez, 2007). As the argument goes, this detaches activism from its grassroots base and

collective emancipatory political action, as funding shapes the agenda of professionalized

NGOs. The sources of exclusion are overshadowed under the notion of rights, while

intersectional aspects of lived realities are obscured under reductive notions of identity

(Mananzala and Spade, 2008; Spade, 2011, 2015). NGOs' ethnographic particulars are

important for evaluating their ability to politicize issues and modify relationships of power (Fisher, 1997; Gamson, 1997). This study's findings suggest that, subsumed in the decontextualized discourses and activism paradigms of the neocorporatist nonprofit industrial complex that inhibit the development of a critical analysis of its own subordination, the Cypriot LGBTI movement has not, to date, sufficiently supported trans* politics. Nevertheless, this has created the possibility for the formation of alternative oppositional communities that can be important venues for empowerment, through the building of subjectivities for the renegotiation of essentialized trans* identities and the redirection of trans* politics.

On the possibility of an autonomous trans* group, a participant explained: 'It's difficult … because … European-level [LGBTI] NGOs … aren't going to support groups that don't follow their agenda' (RB). Another participant said:

> There is this myth that LGBTIs are a homogenous group. … We are trying to do something on our own and it's the ultimate betrayal, regardless of the fact that trans* people are the poor relative. … We have our own group … because we can't afford to wait until our time comes (QJ).

In many parts of the world, colonialism, postcolonial nationhood, and globalization have caused the ability to influence to be dependent on the integration into global and globalizing circuits of power. This creates a hierarchical division between national actors who have the capital to achieve such integration, and those who don't (Gramling and Dutta, 2016: 344). However, some of the excerpts above indicate trans* community organizing – or at least willingness for such organizing – outside normative LGBTI NGO structures. As the remainder of the article will demonstrate, such alternative gender-nonconforming communities' politics, which future research should examine, may actualize through acts of everyday dissidence in interpersonal interactions.

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Everyday dissidence as political agency

Particularly in postcolonial contexts, normative forms of 'modernity' have caused a

hierarchical split between sexuality- and gender-nonconforming groups' politics into those

that are legible within LGBTI activism mainstream public spheres, and subaltern ones that

are not (Gramling and Dutta, 2016: 349; Roy, 2016). However, important political action

does not take place only in spaces conventionally associated with the 'public sphere', and

does not require acknowledgement as organized activist behavior to count as important

(Mansbridge and Flaster, 2007: 633). Often, the most useful political acts are those taking

place in the cracks between institutional structures and are unrecognizable and

uncategorizable (Aizura et al., 2014: 317). A wide variety of low-profile forms of everyday

resistance are deliberate, tactical dissident political acts that practically and symbolically

renegotiate intra- and extra-group power relations (Scott, 1985, 1990). Some participants

reported such acts of everyday dissidence against normative (trans)national discourses and

activism paradigms. An interviewee explained:

> Every time … people are shocked because [my name] doesn't match my external
>
> appearance, I feel satisfaction. … What drives me is that people feel embarrassed they
>
> got shocked. … In that moment I feel empowered … because the embarrassment they
>
> feel shows that they got to realize that people like me do exist. … As I grow more
>
> mature in my understanding, I realize that change will happen only when we … find
>
> the right ways to make it happen (SA).

Another participant said:

When one doesn't even exist, they can't be refusing to act and then be complaining.

… For the system to change, trans* people need to do our part … even though it's

difficult sometimes. … My neighbors would avoid me ... I decided to talk to them

first. … A couple of days later, they came over to my house. … I could see regret in

> their eyes, for not always being nice to me. … [T]hey did their part and, now, almost
>
> the whole neighborhood is friendly (VC).

A third interviewee explained:

> I'd go to this coffee shop. … The owners would stare at me … trying to figure out my
>
> gender. … I kept going back, even though it wasn't easy, always smiling and being
>
> very polite … Progressively, their behavior changed. … It's not fair that we [i.e.
>
> trans* people] must endure such treatment because people don't get it, but our
>
> everyday life won't change unless we find the strength to open up and stand up for
>
> who we are (LR).

These interview excerpts highlight instances of how trans* people challenge gender

expectations and corrode the binary gender power system through everyday political

practices. They also indicate how, through acts of everyday dissidence, they are engaging in

alternative modes of emancipatory trans* political action that escapes the normative LGBTI

NGO structures' confines. This trans* political action – which is stimulated by trans*

peoples' legal and policy invisibility, ad hoc and impromptu institutional practices, and trans*

marginalization within the LGBTI movement –actualizes through interpersonal interactions.

It allows trans* people variety, autonomy, and agency over the formation and presentation of

their political and social selves and over the ways they resist invisibility and interact with,

and aim to affect, their sociocultural context. Thus, everyday dissidence as political agency

functions as an alternative to – or, at least, complements – organized LGBTI NGO politics,

which are often seen be trans* people as not serving their priorities and needs.

Conclusion

This article focused on, and developed context-specific understanding of, the processes

through which trans* marginalization is entrenched and resisted within national and LGBTI

communities in the context of Europeanization. As the findings indicate, amidst the lack of a

trans* legal and policy framework, in Cyprus, trans* marginalization is exacerbated through

institutional responses that selectively draw upon transnational LGBTI human rights

discourses and legal and policy paradigms.

Trans* peoples' precarious position between non-existence and normativization

through such institutional discursive practices affects how they constitute themselves as

subjects of gender and understand, and engage in, trans* politics. They employ gender

identifications as a form of belonging and resistance in ways that challenge the embodiment

of gender polarization and mainstream normative LGBTI NGO politics as prerequisites for

trans* political practice. This creates opportunities for the emergence of alternative trans*

politics outside the neoliberal paradigm of LGBTI politics, which ignores contextual

specificities, overlapping subjectivities, and multiple marginalizations.

Elsewhere also, a trans* legal and policy vacuum has contributed to the creation of

spaces for the collective resignification of gender-nonconforming groups' local knowledges

in ways that challenge legitimate medical and legal knowledge (Pons Rabasa, 2016: 405). I

argued that, in Cyprus, a combination of the reinforced marginalization of trans* people

through ad hoc and selective responses to their claims by state institutions; their

marginalization in the (trans)national LGBTI movement; and their disappointment in its

normalization, institutionalization, professionalization, and NGOization induces the

formation of alternative oppositional gender-nonconforming communities. These new in-the-

making trans* political formations become possible by the space that opens up when national

and transnational discourses and paradigms merge, cross, or collude. They already engage in

alternative modes of emancipatory trans* politics that take the form of everyday dissidence

through personal interactions, and may constitute antipodes to LGBTI NGO politics. For,

based on the interview data, the politics of everyday dissidence are more important to the

majority of participants than European-style large-scale political organizing, as it allows them freedom over the construction of their gendered and political selves.

Although this study's findings are not generalizable to the whole population of gender-nonconforming people, they reveal the potential of case study research for troubling some of the assumptions of feminist, gay and lesbian, trans*, and Europeanization theorizing. The empirical insights offered here might aid gender scholars to explore in a more nuanced way the complex processes of trans* subjectivity, agency, and politics formation, and underpin the development of legal frameworks and policies that are context-appropriate and fundamentally transform trans* lives. In places where relevant legal and policy frameworks and institutional structures are in the making, such approaches could be useful toward decolonizing subjugated knowledges, enabling new political possibilities, and developing practices that acknowledge gender-nonconforming people as constructors of their places within their cultures.

Notes

[1] Resisting a stable referential content for the term, I use the asterisk to open it to a greater range of meanings and capture the variety, diversity, and non-fixity of gender identities and their embodiments. In this analysis, 'trans*' broadly means 'non-cisgender'.

[2] I understand discourse *as* practice and thus do not treat 'paradigm(s)' as independent of, or external to, discourse. Rather, the term means 'discursive practice(s)/framework(s)'. Please also see note 7.

[3] 'Politics' means action that 'seeks to analyze and to transform institutions, socio-cultural processes, political structures as well as global politics' (Varela et al., 2011: 2). 'The political' denotes 'the *processes*, *regimes* or *logics* of language, knowledge and power inherent in doing politics' (Varela et al., 2011: 1; italics in original) and is 'defined by contingency and the impossibility of closure' (Varela et al., 2011: 7), which serve 'as a

condition of possibility for continuous and contingent acts' for challenging dominant orders

(Gressgård, 2011: 34). It is this possibility that I mean by '(political) agency', whilst

acknowledging that 'such agency can only be developed from positions that are socio-

discursive effects of governing regimes' (Varela et al., 2011: 13).

[4] By 'subjectivity formation' I mean the processes through which one is being rendered and

renders oneself as a subject of gender and a political subject. These processes include both

resistance to/subversion of, and compliance/complicity to, normative/normativized notions of

subjectivity (Pons Rabasa, 2016).

[5] It might appear paradoxical to criticize Anglo-American epistemological dominance whilst

drawing upon Anglo-American literature and writing for a British/American journal in

English. However, as Mauro Cabral explains, 'Even to be able to have this conversation … I

must [do so] … just to be part of the interchange' (Cabral, cited in Boellstroff et al., 2014:

422). This analysis does not aspire to escape the 'inescapable project of coloniality', but to

make 'explicit a colonial/colonizing context that is routinely invisibilized' (Stryker and

Currah, 2014: 303). By focusing on Cyprus – not as a case that is unique or qualitatively

different, but as one that is perhaps illustrative of more pronounced and persistent

mechanisms of trans* marginalization due to the cumulative effects of conflict, ethnic

division, nationalism, colonialism, and Europeanization – this article does not seek to put to

rest, but to seriously engage with, the question of how the 'colonial imaginary' could be

acknowledged in ways that 'the agencies of subjugated embodied subjects can become

transformative of their worlds' (Stryker and Currah, 2014: 303-304).

[6] 'Colonialism' is employed both in its conventional definition – i.e. the formal, direct, and

political rule of territories by a country – and to denote the emergence, continuation, and

interrelations of various modes of domination and hegemonic sociopolitical relations.

[7] 'Discursive practice(s)' refers to the practices or operations of 'discourses' – i.e. of knowledge formations (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014). 'Discursive practices' are the practices of 'discourses' and 'discourses' are sets of practices, while distinctions between sites of knowledge formation and operation – texts, institutions, law, etc. – are of secondary importance to Foucault, since 'Knowledge *in* practices and knowledge *as* practices (discursive practices)' are 'complementary perspectives, bridging a symbolic-material division' (Bacchi and Bonham, 2014: 191; italics in original). Such Foucauldian definition of the terms and approach to analysis means that focusing on particular events, individuals, policy documents, or archive material does not suffice to document processes – including processes of Europeanization. Therefore, in this analysis, the aim is not to document processes of Europeanization in Cyprus – even though this could be the focus of future research – but to highlight how ideas – including ideas about Europeanization – are understood by, affect, and are affected by, research participants.

[8] 'Political life' refers to a broad field of political activity not limited to formal or high politics, but encompassing the politics of the everyday – i.e. all kinds of everyday interactions (Butler, 1997).

[9] www.acceptcy.org/en/node/241 (accessed 26 October 2019).

[10] www.acceptcy.org/en/node/242 (accessed 26 October 2019).

[11] Costas Gavrielides, interview with author, 23 February, 2019.

[12] Petros Papadopoulos, interview with author, 4 July, 2018.

[13] This project was approved by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee at De Montfort University.

[14] By 'neoliberal paradigm of LGBTI politics' I mean the paradigm of politics that remains limited to claiming identity-based rights whist ignoring intersectional sources of oppression (e.g. Varela et al., 2011; Puar, 2007, 2013).

[15] By 'the human rights industrial complex' I mean the gay and lesbian human rights industry's continuing proliferation of 'Euro-American constructs of identity that privilege identity politics, "coming out," public visibility, and legislative measures as the dominant barometers of social progress' (Puar 2013: 338).

[16] 'NGOization' refers to a shift of collective action to NGOs – which are vertically structured and compartmentalize their work around specific priority issues in seeking to produce marketable services and knowledge – and to the institutionalization, professionalization, and depoliticization of movements (e.g. Choudry and Kapoor, 2013; Rodriguez, 2007).

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TABLE 1: Participant Characteristics

Characteristic[a]	N
Age	
18-30	8
31-40	7
41-50	5
>50	2
Place of residence	
City	12
Village	10
Nationality	
Cypriot	17
Cypriot & other	2
Other	3
Ethnicity self-identification	
Cypriot	10
Cypriot-other	7
Other	5
Gender self-identification	
Male/man	7
Female/woman	6
Trans* male/man	5
Trans* female/woman	3
Other	1

Annual income (euros)[b]	
No income	6
1-3,000	4
3,001-6,000	3
6,001-9,000	2
9,001-12,000	4
≥12,001	1
≥20,000	2
Sources of annual income	
Benefits	6
Salary	10
Health coverage/insurance	
State (basic services, reduced fees)	15
Private	0
No coverage/insurance	7
Education	
Secondary	9
College	8
University	5
Professional field	
Unemployed	12
Services	6
Arts	2
Business	2

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[a] General categories and broad ranges used to ensure nonidentification of participants.

[b] The median monthly salary in 2016 was 1,498 euros (Statistical Service of the Republic of

Cyprus, 2017).