4  What Is ‘Queer’ about Queer Festivals?

Negotiating Identity and Autonomy

Introduction

Last day of the Oslo Queer Festival
Oslo, Hausmania Squat
17:00

[In the courtyard] We are about seven people smoking. ‘This is the difference between queer theory and activism. Theory tries to deconstruct identities, whereas here we are building an identity: We are all queer!’ Luca, a Norwegian trans man, very active in the organization of the festival, attracts my attention. Queer theory and queer activism? Interesting. I wonder. ‘I have done gender studies’, says Nikolaj, a Danish performer visiting the festival. All the others shook their heads. It seems that it is only me and Nikolaj, who have studied gender at university.

[...] 
[Inside the building] Some people are preparing handcraft and drawings on a table. Some others are painting on white T-shirts. One participant makes a drawing on a T-shirt. She is sketching a multiple-choice quiz with the following options to tick: 1. Man, 2. Woman, 3. Fuck Gender, with the third option ticked.

[...] 
I start talking with Kaja, one of the ‘leaders’ of the festival’s organization. She says: ‘If we start talking about real politics inside the festival, half of the participants will go away. Some others, however, ask me why we never discuss politics. Last year, I prepared a workshop called ‘Queer Feminism’. I had no idea what it would be about. So, I show up, and say: I have no idea what queer feminism is. Let’s discuss it. But in the very end no one takes Oslo Queer seriously. Neither the left, nor the gay community, nor the radicals.’

The above-mentioned discussions are illustrative of the way identity issues are debated and practiced within the queer festivals. Their ‘identity crisis’ (‘no one takes Oslo Queer seriously’), and the struggle of the actors to position themselves within the political sphere through identity-work

Field notes, Oslo, September 2011.
guides the analysis of this chapter in which I unfold the identity-building process of queer festivals. To understand the anti-identitarian identity of queer festivals, it is important to look at activists’ sayings over the content and the political usefulness of identity. Debates and interviews will help us delve into individual and collective meanings of what it means to be queer. These meanings can change and might depend on whether they originate from the festivals as a collective endeavour, and by the organizers and the participants at the individual level.

This process of queer festivals’ identity-work is investigated by analysing a set of discursive practices. The discursive practices help us understand how actors organize speech, speech sequence, how they relate to each other, and the conventions and narrative genres that are applied. A systematizing of these practices reveals the identity processes that take place among festivals’ members. Overall, queer is presented in the following terms: (a) an anti-identity narrative, built through its differentiation from what festivals perceive as the mainstream LGBT movement; (b) inclusivity, and (c) more rarely as anti-capitalist rhetoric.

I begin with an overview of the relevant theoretical debates. I continue by analysing how queer festivals envision their collective identity through self-presentation strategies. I use for this purpose the callout, a short piece of text intended to draw attention in social media. Callouts are crucial to understand how festivals, in the pursuit of becoming public and attracting participants, discursively build the contours of their collective identity through antinormative narratives. Queer anti-identity narrative is imagined as inclusive. This inclusivity is, however, subject to limitations. In the third section, I discuss the way queer actors attempt an introduction of anti-capitalist discourse in the festivals. Queer anti-capitalist discourse is not systematically present in all festivals. Anti-capitalist critique is contingent, depending on the presence of activists with a relevant political socialization who want to integrate it in the festival through workshops. Although occasional, its inclusion in this chapter is essential, because it points at one of the main components of the distinctive character of European queer identity-building: autonomy. Autonomy builds upon post-Marxist theories on the commons and relates to the inclusion of queer festivals in left-wing squatting scenes. A relevant workshop, which took place at the Queeristan festival in 2012, is used as evidence of this trend. The chapter closes by showing how these identity-building discursive characteristics rearticulate an oppositional public, which seeks to engage with issues of collective identity in terms of alternative political practices and prefigurative imaginations, rather than with concrete policy-oriented concepts.
Queer, identity and autonomy: Theoretical insights

Input of queer theories into queer identities

Joshua Gamson’s publication on the ‘queer dilemma’ had a great echo in collective identity studies. It posited for the first time the question: What happens when movements want to escape from identities?

Queerness in its most distinctive forms shakes the ground on which gay and lesbian politics has been built, taking apart the ideas of a ‘sexual minority’ and a ‘gay com-munity,’ indeed of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and even ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ It builds on central difficulties of identity-based organizing: the instability of identities both individual and collective, their made-up yet necessary character. It exaggerates and explodes these troubles, haphazardly attempting to build a politics from the rubble of deconstructed collective categories. This debate, and other related debates in lesbian and gay politics, is not only over the content of collective identity (whose definition of ‘gay’ counts?), but over the everyday viability and political usefulness of sexual identities (is there and should there be such a thing as ‘gay,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘man,’ ‘woman’?). (Gamson 1995: 390)

More than 20 years later, queer politics has not yet managed to escape from these identity debates. Categories and classifications are still very present, they structure to a large extent society’s visions on gender and sexuality. Moreover, binaries are enacted by multiple social institutions: law, education, media. Queer politics today goes through all these processes facing multi-faceted identity dilemmas: transnationalism, neoliberalism, financial crisis, increasing precarity, coalitions with other social movements, recognition of gay rights in the West, regression in other parts of the world. Newer factors have been challenging queer politics.

Beyond social movement studies, humanities scholars have been debating the ‘nature’ of queer, and its utility for politics of gender and sexuality. Queer theorists were the first to introduce the term queer into the academic sphere. These scholars responded to the institutionalization of lesbian and gay studies in US academia, which saw the sexual subject as a historical product and culturally dependent on the material relations in which it develops (Chauncey 1995; D’Emilio 1998). The social constructionist approach, as it got named, was quickly challenged by literature and humanities scholars who ‘advanced an expressly critical approach to the subject of Lesbian and Gay Studies and those institutional forces that conspired to produce
the modern homosexual’ (Green 2007: 28). Queer theory thus emerged as a response to lesbian and gay studies. Although the former believed they had liberated the homosexual subject one and for all, queer theorists saw this liberation as reiterating social control through its insistence on sexuality as the primary characteristic of the subject. For queer theorists, *queer* is not a more inclusive evolution of the gay and lesbian movement. It functions rather as a parallel sphere. Its identity is shaped as a response to this distinction from the frame of gay and lesbian identity politics, by setting as aspiration to challenge dominant identitarian discourses and propose new modes of performing politics:

Queer politics [...] has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay politics; it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear (Warner 2005: 213).

Queer theorists accompanied the emergence of their new field with an exploration of Foucault’s theses on the regulatory mechanisms of the sexological and psychiatric discourse of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1978). It became urgent then to ‘decenter’ sexuality in order to undo, or deconstruct, the regulatory powers which create the (sexual) subject:

The current term queer, too, while still carrying something of its historical connotations of sexual abnormality, quickly covers them up by presenting itself as gender-inclusive, democratic, queer texts, habits, and the issue of a future multicultural, and multispecies, and thus effectively shifts the ground away from the nitty-gritty of sexuality – the polymorphous-perverse that Mario Mieli theorized in the visionary, radical 1970s. (De Lauretis 2011: 248-249; emphasis added)

Decentring sexuality as the primary characteristic (that we find in queer festivals’ discourses, too), does not mean forgetting sexuality. For early queer theorists, the focus should move on to sites of resistance against heteronormativity. These sites can be spaces, sexual practices or bodies (Butler 1993). So, in queer theorists’ attempt to build queerness as a distinct academic and political term, they often discussed it as a category that did not necessarily include all homosexuals: ‘There are a lot of people – visibly, actively, impressively, lesbian and gay – who do not find a home in queerness’ (Warner 2005: 316). In a similar vein, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argued that:
Everyone knows that there are some lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer, and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism, or without routing their same-sex eroticism through the identity labels lesbian or gay. (1993: 13)

We can locate this emphatic attempt of queerness to be distinct from lesbian and gay identities in the effort the first queer theorists made to build their theoretical approach as autonomous from lesbian and gay (but also women’s) studies in order to create a separate discipline in the academic field that would align this stream of thought with new forms of activism emerging at that moment in the USA. Synergies were also at place, since many queer theorists participated in these movements as well. These political movements, such as ACT UP, Sex Panic! or Queer Nation, would borrow vocabularies from the emerging queer theory to build their parallel counter-movements vis-à-vis an increasingly institutionalized LGBT movement.

**Queer anti-capitalist critique: A European perspective**

How does this history of queer theory, as radically distinct from lesbian and gay, get interpreted in the European experience? As we will see in this chapter, queer festivals borrow several elements of older and recent queer theories, mainly those emphasizing the destabilization and the fictitious character of gender and sexual identities. But in addition to this, European queer festivals have been influenced by their embeddedness in left-wing political spaces and traditions. We can trace back their genealogies to Marxist feminist and gay liberation movements of the 1970s and the 1980s that flourished in several Western European countries. These movements were the product of battles that feminist and gay liberation activists fought inside the left-wing scenes in which they participated, in order to ensure that their identities and their claims were no longer considered as secondary. These movements kept Marxism’s materialist traditions, claiming that capitalism was heavily influencing gender and sexual oppression. Beyond the gay liberation and the materialist feminist movements of the 1970s, the group Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners in Thatcherite Britain of the 1980s is a typical example of synergies between identity politics and Marxist critiques. This group, although constituted by ‘lesbians and gays’, built its collective identity through a framing on an anti-neoliberal critique, expanding the scope of sexual politics in solidarity with the workers movement (Colpani 2017).
After the 1980s, the relations between gay and lesbian movements and other Marxist or post-Marxist movements persisted (although not always in a peaceful way). These relations spanned the 1990s and the new millennium with the global justice movements, coinciding with the emergence of European queer movements within the anti-capitalist left (Brown 2007) or the anti-authoritarian scenes (Eleftheriadis 2015b). The global justice movements provided a fertile ground for the first European transnational queer (ex. Queer No Borders), and queer feminist groups (ex. NextGeneration) to mobilize in the same activist spaces and challenge from the inside the celebration of masculinity and gendered division of activist labour in these spaces. The socialization of these activists within a left-wing environment laid a foundation in which they linked capitalism, gender and sexuality (Klapeer and Schonpflug 2015). European queer identities have therefore been influenced by the spaces in which they were born and mobilized.

Today, in queer festivals one of the most fertile imbrications between anti-capitalism, gender and sexual oppression has been the engagement of queer actors with post-Marxist feminist critiques and the theories of the ‘commons’. Silvia Federici, an autonomous Italian Marxist feminist, whose works often circulate in the festivals, contends that:

The first lesson we can gain from these struggles is that the ‘commoning’ of the material means of reproduction is the primary mechanism by which a collective interest and mutual bonds are created. It is also the first line of resistance to a life of enslavement and the condition for the construction of autonomous spaces undermining from within the hold that capitalism has on our lives. (2011: 6)

The achievement of ‘commoning’, of creating communal forms of economy, which move beyond the frames of contemporary capitalist modes of production, is essential for the construction of autonomy. Autonomy, within such a feminist framework, includes sexual and gender autonomy: an overcoming of gender and sexual binaries, which are continually reproduced through capitalism. Autonomy can thus become a mode of producing new kinds of affinities and sociabilities, which move beyond the normalized categories of friendship/love/family. Individually, autonomy is presented as a free-choice in decision-making for every person, to perform their preferred gender and practice their selected sexuality. Collectively, autonomy relates to what Katsiaficas describes as: (a) independence from political parties and trade unions, (b) ‘politics of the first person’, (c) direct-democratic forms of decision-making (1997: 6-8). Following this line of thought, all
three collective characteristics of autonomy apply to queer festivals. They explicitly proclaim the independence of political parties; they conform to the ‘politics of the first person’ model through their feminist engagement, and, finally, they organize according to horizontal consensus-based organizational forms, as we saw in the previous chapter. Queering the commons is not a project present in all festivals. But by creating spaces where ‘knowledge and resources are shared freely’ (Brown 2012: 1070), queer festivals are part of the wider discussion of commoning politics, by making their prefigurative visions a political practice materialized in physical spaces.

In the next section, I demonstrate through an analysis of festivals’ callouts how queer and other anti-capitalist theories have been integrated and adapted in a ‘real’ activist context, and how festivals imagine their collective identities. Here festivals’ anti-identitarian framework is explicitly evidenced. There is in fact an input from queer theory, present in the narrative of destabilization of the binary systems of gender and sexuality. But, queer festivals advance framings of inclusivity as well, a term that relates more to sociological incorporation of multiple identities. Activists’ interpretations of their relation to queerness is also presented in this section, evidenced through interviews. Second, I use a case study from a workshop organized in the Queeristan festival in 2012 to demonstrate the importance of the introduction of anti-capitalist discourses in queer festivals.

**Addressing identity issues in an activist context: Beyond LGBT mainstreaming**

**Callouts as indicators of identity-work**

Callouts are the texts queer festivals use to get public on social media. They function as self-presentation texts in which queer actors deploy their discursive strategies in order to attract as many participants as possible. Callouts can often take the form of ‘manifestos’. They aim at producing a distinct image of festivals’ uniqueness in the social movements’ field. Using specific vocabularies and sets of beliefs, or otherwise frames (Benford and Snow 2000: 614), callouts contribute to the construction of the normative

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2 According to Benford and Snow, collective action frames denote ‘an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction. It is active in the sense that something is being done, and processual in the sense of a dynamic, evolving process. It entails agency in the sense that what is evolving is the work of social movement.
and affective framework to which the potential participants will be exposed, while at the same time, they give meaning to their own actions. The callouts’ analysis indicates that queer festivals reinforce the differentiation gap between the ‘queer’ and the ‘gay public’ (Calhoun 2004: 166), by explicitly distancing themselves from a supposedly ‘mainstream gay identity’. Queer festivals choose to focus on the promotion of an inclusive – in terms of class, race, ability and gender – ethos. Their rhetoric is rather confrontational and angry, while often it is also accompanied by humour and parody.

Callouts have a major communicative importance for queer festivals. Through their circulation on social media, and on their websites, they attract participants by making the events known to people across the net. Festivals’ organizers inform but also ask for new recruits, as well as for proposals for workshops and performances. In addressing an a priori unknown audience, callouts try to establish therefore a public (Warner 2002: 55). This autotelic communication has in mind some imaginary, yet not unreal, addressees.

Callouts set the boundaries for the identity-work which will take place during the event. They allow actors to position themselves in the movements’ field, by presenting their actions and ideological orientations, setting hence the boundaries on who is welcome to come. Although their future participants are a priori unknown, festivals’ organizers have some ideas of how they would look like, what sort of gender and sexual identifications these will have. These identifications are set in order to distinguish queer festivals from other political events, and therefore build their distinct collective identity.

Their analysis informs us on two things. First, that there is an ongoing legacy of the anti-identitarian narrative of queer theory in festivals’ identities. Second, this abstract theorization of anti-identitarianism is accompanied by a more concrete discourse on inclusivity. This is framed as an openness towards individuals and groups with intersecting discriminations, in terms of disability, race, or economic exclusion.3

The Anti-identitarian frame: Beyond gay and lesbian

In the first place, queer is presented as different from gay and lesbian. According to the QuEar festival in Berlin, ‘queer is not merely a synonym of organizations or movement activists. And it is contentious in the sense that it involves the generation of interpretive frames that not only differ from existing ones but that may also challenge them’ (Benford and Snow 2000: 614).

3 In the Appendix, I have included a table with extracts of the festivals’ callouts.
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gay and lesbian’. In a similar vein, Queeristan in 2012 argued that ‘although Queeristan strives to bring together all sorts of sexual outlaws, we do not want it to be another gay pride’. The Da Mieli a Queer festival argued that ‘the LGBTI movement is often relegating itself in the foxhole of same-sex marriage and LGBT parenting; that for equality is a dutiful battle but we (queers) should try to imagine new ways of raising and struggling, new practices, new intuitions.

A common frame across all festivals is the attempt to differentiate queer from LGBT or gay, either by making explicit this difference, or by criticizing the latter’s institutionalization processes and its obsession with gay marriage and rights’ equality. An essential component of queer identity-work is thus its demarcation vis-à-vis what it sees as its competitor. It is important to stress that this differentiation is not operating through the exclusion of specific individuals who have been ‘co-opted’ by LGBT identities. What is rather pointed out is the LGBT movement as such which has shown mainstreaming signs of institutionalization. In that sense, all ‘sexual outlaws’ are encouraged to participate in the festivals, no matter if they identify as gay, lesbians, or queer.

More specifically, the boundaries queer festivals attempt to build as a distinction from the gay and lesbian movement, and its supposed identity politics tendency, can be seen in two streams: deviance and explicit opposition to the LGBT movement. To begin with, queer festivals are not imagined as one more identity on the ‘shopping list’ of identities (Flesher-Fominaya 2015: 73). They are rather seen as a ‘deviation’ from normality, that needs to be celebrated. The QuEAR festival’s callout is illustrative:

Quer is a deviation from the norm, challenging and questioning boundaries that are upheld within mainstream society. Queer is also a utopia, not in the bourgeois sense of otherworldliness, but as a space that needs to be constantly (re)created and projected into new spaces, which is the aim of this event. (QuEAR 2011)

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4 QuEAR Festival, ‘About’, http://quear.blogsport.eu/en/about/ (last accessed: 19/09/2017). All citations from the QuEAR festival in this section come from this source. All the following citations in English are in their original form.

5 Queeristan, ‘Calls for Contributions to Queeristan 2012’, http://trikster.net/blog/?p=574 (last accessed: 31/08/2017). All citations from the Queeristan festival of 2012 in this section come from this source.

6 Da Mieli a queer, ‘From Mieli to Queer: LGBTI Cultures Experiences in Movement, 4-7th April, 2013’, https://www.facebook.com/note/s/62844145348387 (last accessed: 31/08/2017). All citations from the Da Mieli festival in this section come from this source.
‘Deviation’ from the norm becomes not a matter of shame, but on the contrary a matter of celebration and, as Kosofsky Sedgwick described, a stigma that activists reverse into a political identity (1993: 4). This reminds us, certainly, of the Pride parades politics which also celebrate, and in certain contexts resist strong homophobia (see, for instance, Pride politics of the Warsaw marches, Ayoub 2016: 53-86). For queer festivals in the Western capitals, LGBT, however, is not seen as deviant, but as already integrated in social normativity. The phrases and terms in festivals’ callous stress this normalization process of the LGBT movement and resort to a multiple set of idioms to describe it: ‘straight and gay norms’; ‘deviation from the norm’ (QuEar); ‘break free from structures and norms imposed on us’; ‘counter the normative workings of gender and identity’ (Queeristan 2012).

For some festivals, the LGBT movement is even explicitly accused of getting co-opted by the heteronormative society. A clear illustration of this process is the introduction of the term ‘homonormativity’ in Queeristan’s promotion material in 2013. Not only ‘homonormativity’ became part of the distinct vocabulary of Queeristan but it also obtained a central role in its identity-work. This term was coined in queer theory in order to define a ‘politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions – such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction – but upholds and sustains them while promoting the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency ad a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 2002: 179). Queeristan used this queer theory term to create a promotion video called: ‘HomoNormativity Ad’. In this parodic video, the festival’s organizers explain what this term means:

Are you tired of being a bad queer? Do you want to be a good gay? Well, look no further. [The] FDA [Food and Drug Administration] has recently approved a new drug called homonormativity. This drug has been proven to help bad queers like yourself, to assimilate to the heteronormative society, by behaving the same as straight dudes."

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8 Copenhagen Queer Festival, ‘Copenhagen Queer Festival 2009’, http://trikster.net/blog/?p=321 (last accessed: 19/09/2017). All citations from the Copenhagen festival in this section come from this source.
10 Transcription from the promotion video. Original in English.
The video plays with this binary opposition between the kind and normalized gay on the one hand, and the bad and deviant queer on the other. This does not happen only in verbal terms, but the distinction takes place through images as well. In the video, gays are portrayed as white cis boys and cis girls, with neat clothes, discussing about their wedding plans. Queers, on the contrary, depicted as an a-gendered mass dancing in gloomy places, sexually aroused and kissing each other, and smacking each other’s behinds, while their racial backgrounds are much more diverse. It is obvious therefore that this promotion video does not only describes a division between gays and queers, but more importantly, it performatively establishes it (Butler 1988), and turning it into Queeristan’s main raison d’être. The critique of identity therefore is accompanied by the provision of a space for all those who do not feel part of the mainstream LGBT community.

Second, the commitment of queer to identifying as different from gay and lesbian identities is another main constituent of queer festivals’ identity-work. This is clearly stated in the manifesto of the Da Mieli a Queer festival: ‘[T]he LGBTI movement is often relegating itself in the foxhole of same-sex marriage and LGBT parenting.” Queer festivals tend to read the LGBT as a movement with a rather limited scope. By setting itself to the defence of a specific, normative sexual identity (gay, lesbian), the LGBT movement is accused of missing other parts of oppression, and thus setting itself apart from other struggles, which do not relate directly to sexuality, but include economic exploitation, race and gender relations.

Despite their critique of identity, festivals’ dissociation from the LGBT movement is paradoxically part of another identity-work, as evidenced also in the posters that decorate them. For instance, a banner welcoming the participants at the Copenhagen Queer Festival was displaying: ‘This is not a gay party. This is a queer party.’ This slogan and all the above examples point to the argument that there is an agency of building queerness as a distinct identity, against a ‘gay’ one. In a performative manner, festivals set the boundaries between these two identities. Going beyond the LGBT or gay identities is a queer claim, but it is not the only one. As we see below, callouts and other texts are very vocal in including people from different social backgrounds, be it social, economic or racial.

11 Da Mieli a Queer, ‘From Mieli to Queer: LGBTI Cultures Experiences in Movement, 4-7th April, 2013’.
12 Poster in English, Copenhagen Queer Festival, 2011. Personal collection.
13 I also read this demarcation as a reaction against the masculine domination of gay males within the LGBT movement, contrary to queer politics, which is imagined as promoter of a more feminist agenda.
Inclusion in multiple terms

Inclusion is a major frame of festivals’ callouts. This frame encourages people to join the festivals, independently from their gender or sexuality, but other facets of discrimination and their intersections are stressed as well. Inclusion for queer festivals encompasses race, class, disability and citizenship status, too. A significant concern for festivals is economic background. Callouts inform potential participants from other cities and countries about the possibilities of accommodation. Many festivals state having means to provide performers, workshop organizers and participants, with financial support for their trips. The Oslo Queer Festival’s callout is illustrative in that sense: ‘We are happy to help those who need it with some accommodation for your travel expenses, with all the money left after the festival.’14 In a similar vein, the Copenhagen festival’s callout states: ‘We wish to create a space, which is not based on money, as we find this is the case in society today. The festival is open to all, whether or not they have money.’15 With their discursive opening to people with few economic resources, queer festivals are trying to effectively address exclusion, not only in terms of gender expression and sexual identity, but also in terms of economic status.

Callouts address issues of language, age, and disability inclusions, too. Language in particular is another main concern since callouts are primarily written in English and the festival’s local language. In 2013, for instance, the queer festivals in Amsterdam and in Berlin displayed their callouts in other languages, too, such as Turkish and Arabic. Translation in these migrant languages aims at a rather non-English speaking audience, which lives, however, in the cities in which the festivals take place.

Age becomes another crucial factor for the inclusive identity-work of queer festivals. As we saw in the online survey, most participants are included in the age group 20-30 years old. The inclusion of participants with older ages becomes then an issue for the organizers, expressed in festivals’ callouts. Finally, disability forms part of the inclusive narrative of the callouts, too. Oslo’s callout is particularly exemplary to the degree that it links several discriminatory conditions:

> It is important for us that everyone can take part in the festival, independent of economy or age. [...] We are happy to change locations for the

14 Oslo Queer Festival, ‘Practical Info’.
15 Copenhagen Queer Festival, ‘Copenhagen Queer Festival 2009’.
workshops, build ramps and make Blitz [the squat in which the festival took place] as accessible as we can.16

The above frames share some common points. They attempt to move the boundaries of inclusion a bit further. They are not completely oppositional to the existence of the identities per se. But they are rather critical of the way these are used to erect barriers in political participation and claims-making, both by the mainstream LGBT movement and the government.

An aspect that is not much present, however, in festivals’ callouts is the affirmative invitation of racialized people, or people of colour as differently portrayed. Although festivals explicitly talk about ‘anti-racist queer critique’ (Queeristan 2012), ‘dealing with any form of racism’ (Oslo), ‘address racist structures’ (QUEar), ‘break free from norms imposed by racist society’ (Copenhagen), the inclusion of race as a crucial parameter of queer politics is relatively absent from their discourses. This lack of race-affirmative politics coincides with the relative absence of racialized people within the queer festivals, with the notable exception of the Queeristan festivals. Festivals’ whiteness is not, however, uncritically ignored. Workshops are organized on these issues, and debates on the ‘white character’ of some practices, such as veganism, promoted in the festivals turn into heated debates, as we will see in the next chapter.

Moreover, although economic exclusion is a significant parameter for festivals’ inclusive identity-work, people from lower social classes are relatively absent, as shown also in the online survey. This absence, or even the narrative of ‘independent of economy’ or ‘open to all, whether or not they have money’, seems to legitimize the participation of middle-class actors, by providing the alibi of supporting all people wanting to attend the festivals. ‘Independent of economy’ indicates therefore a sort of self-consciousness of the middle-class sociological and cultural dominance in the festivals.

Overall, festivals’ anti-identitarian critique, as framed mainly in their callouts, consists of acknowledging the importance of going beyond gender and sexual identities. Homonormativity is also present in some festivals, indicating the dialogue between festivals and queer theory. But festivals are also very prone to inclusivity. This discourse is made up of idioms welcoming people from different social and economic backgrounds. Finally, queer is presented as anti-racist, making part of their identity-work. But how do activists perceive festivals’ discourses on queerness?

16 Oslo Queer Festival, ‘Practical Info’.
Does education matter? Activists’ narratives on ‘queerness’

Activists and participants incorporate as well as challenge the narratives of identity-work as promoted by queer festivals. In this section, we will see how the education of each participant might alter the way they describe ‘queerness’. The destabilization discourse of queer theory is much more integrated in activists with PhD training in gender studies. Whereas members with lower credentials emphasize the practical and alternative aspects of queerness.

Vabbi, from the QuEar festival, at the time of the interview was a PhD candidate in gender studies. He described queer as a deviance from the norm:

> I think ultimately queer to me means two things: one is [...] opposition towards the regulation of lives, by gender and sexuality. Through my theoretical work, I have often had to think about you know what is it that I’m thinking through, what’s the problem? [...] And then, there’s this amazing text by Gayle Rubin, ‘Notes on thinking sex’,17 where she [...] [presents] the circle model, where she writes about what forms of sexuality are allowed and which ones are not. And it’s this multidimensional model, which she does not say that one dimension is more important so she doesn’t put homosexuality in there. But she also has money/no money, BDSM or vanilla, intergenerational versus intra-generational, like old and young, and so on. And I thought, I like that. (Berlin, August 2011)

Vabbi’s understanding of ‘queer’ is mediated through his own academic training in gender studies, and conforms, in a more sophisticated way, to how the Berlin’s festival callout was describing queer as ‘deviation from the norm’.

In the callouts, queer is imagined as opposed to what the LGBT movement ‘traditionally’ represents. This imagined opposition is activated and more articulately expressed, once there is a clash between two political organizations working on the same field of sexual politics. The story of Casimiro from the organization committee of the Roman festival and PhD student at that moment, is illustrative. In the following extract, he attempts to describe QueerLab, his organization, as opposed to the LGBT section of the communist-oriented student movement Link:

> [The Link movement has] a very traditional way of facing the questions. So, it’s more LGBT oriented: recognition of diversity, recognition of rights.

17 He refers to one of the fundamental texts of lesbian and gay studies: Rubin’s ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’ (1984).
So it’s a way in which it is *different* from queer politics as we know: they do not really question the binaries, and this kind of stuff. It’s acceptance of diversity: promotion, all this kind of stuff. (Casimiro, Rome, 2013)

According to Casimiro, a movement working in the old school, traditional way of recognition of rights and diversity is ‘*more LGBT oriented*’. On the contrary, queer is imagined as different from just a recognition of rights: queer is supposed to challenge the binaries, by moving beyond ‘recognition’, which is the major political claim of the LGBT movement. By focusing only on issues of ‘rights’, the LGBT movement’s discourse does not attempt to destabilize social and political norms, thus maintaining the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality, man and woman, the traditional gender and sexual binaries.

Describing queer as ‘something different’ is reproduced by activists with lower educational capital, too, although they tend to emphasize more the practical implications of what it means to be queer in everyday life. So, in less theoretical wording, activists and participants with no academic training imagine queerness as an identity against the ‘mainstream’, as it operates within society and politics. In these activists’ narratives, ‘mainstream’ holds a negative connotation. By opposing the ‘mainstream’, queer connects with an image of ‘alternative lifestyle’. To the similar question of ‘How do you perceive queer?’ Vladimir, from the Copenhagen festival, explains queer through anti-mainstream words:

> At the beginning, I was [perceiving] something with alternative, alternative, *non-mainstream, non-mainstream gay or lesbian*, and then yes, [it was] implicit that we had some basic feminism, being left and, and yes, more or less, and then I’m realizing more or less that in fact it is a culture and yeah like every culture you have to learn it. (Copenhagen, July 2011; emphasis added)

Vladimir’s response is beyond academic explanations on queer. His educational background and his professional status explains the fact that he translates queer in a more practice-oriented, everyday experience. In fact, Vladimir was a call-centre worker in Berlin at the time of the interview. According to his interpretations, queer functions as an alternative culture to be learnt.¹⁸

¹⁸ Vladimir’s argument is addressed again in Chapter 5, where I discuss the cultural aspects of queer identity.
The alternative lifestyle of queerness is also part of Gem's descriptions, which connect ‘queer’ with everyday life. Gem, similar to Vladimir, does not have academic training. In order to define her conception of ‘queer’ she narrates a personal story:

There was a SlutWalk on Saturday. [...] In the morning of the SlutWalk, when we were dressing up, I had a shirt on that was half [see-through]. [...] Automatically my girlfriend told me, ‘Wear a bra’ [...] And it was amazing, because both of us are very conscious people. She is part of the orga[nization] team of this thing, very very – I don’t want to say “liberal” but for me, *questioning the hierarchy we’re brought into the society*. [She gave me a] [...] sort of [...] automatic response: ‘Are you putting a bra [on]?’ It could be [...] [that she was actually saying], ‘Maybe people will see your tits.’ (Berlin, August 2011).

Queer is seen as ‘a constant questioning of bases, roots, behaviours, ways of thinking, the culture we live in.’ Gem’s understanding of queer connects to practical, everyday aspects of life. Gem’s girlfriend’s request for her to ‘put a bra on’ during the Berlin SlutWalk questioned their queer commitment to challenging gender norms. Gem was surprised to hear her girlfriend being sexually conformist instead of being sexually challenging. Gem shares the same cultural capital as Vladimir, stating in her own interview that she ‘has never read Judith Butler’. So, for both sets of activists, with or without academic training, queer is thought of in a distinct manner. For the former, queer is linked with queer theory and thus imagined as an anti-identitarian fantasy. For the latter, queer has direct connections with alternative spaces of socialization and everyday life implications.

Festivals point at certain directions when they present themselves to the public. The critique against gay and lesbian identities is largely stressed. The influence of queer theory is evidenced in their callouts and texts, through their focus on ‘deviance’, on ‘anti-normativity’ or ‘homonormativity’, on ‘straight and gay norms’. But more importantly, festivals stress inclusive frames, too. It is this sort of encompassing larger segments of the public that makes ‘queer’ distinct from ‘gay and lesbian’. Rather than completely spurning the concept of identity, festivals attempt to broaden it, by encompassing different aspects of potential discrimination, such as language, age and disability. We could argue, therefore, that queer anti-identitarian identity-building, part of the historical legacy of queer theory, is accompanied by an openness towards ‘multiple, tolerant identities’ (Della Porta 2005b). This characteristic of global justice movements is defined by ‘inclusiveness and
positive emphasis upon diversity and cross-fertilization’ (Della Porta 2005b: 186). Festivals express an interest in actors from diverse gender, sexual and social backgrounds. Finally, they imagine queer as a concrete and practical way to live one’s everyday life.

In this section, one of the points I raised was the festivals’ interest in people from lower social backgrounds. It is interesting to see now if this openness is just part of a broader inclusivity strategy of the festivals, or if it is accompanied by a systematic analysis of the class system and the economic relations which sustain it. Do contemporary queer festivals continue the legacy of European queer activists’ anti-capitalist and materialist politics of the previous decades? Let us see in the next section which festivals advance such a critique and how they present it.

Looking for queerness in anti-capitalism: Structural or contingent?

Queeristan festival. Third day. Amsterdam 2012
Workshop on the Commons

There are about 20 people gathered for the workshop. Four organizers, all of them students living in Amsterdam: three are doing their master’s and one her PhD; two come from Turkey, one from the Netherlands and the other from Poland; two men and two women. The setting of the workshop resembles an academic conference. There is a PowerPoint presentation to be displayed. The organizers distribute the outline of the presentations on paper, accompanied by a corpus of five texts: Isabell Lorey: ‘Governmental Precarization’; Maurizio Lazzarato: ‘Immaterial Labour’; Paolo Virno: ‘The Ambivalence of Disenchantment’; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: ‘The Production of the Common’; Nick Dyer-Withefor: ‘The Circulation of the Common’. The organizers start by presenting themselves and the theme of the workshop, and announce that a discussion with the audience is foreseen at the end.

[…] The audience seems to have diverse backgrounds. Many of them are PhD and master’s students. There are two women, however, who self-identify as a ‘lower-class farmer’ and an ‘illegal precarious mother’.

[…] The discussion centres around the idea of the ‘commons’, as a specific social need, such as alimentation, and the Common, as a non-material shared good, without owners, such as language. Organizers claim that
the Queeristan festival in Amsterdam belongs to the category of a ‘space where the Common is produced’. In this sense, they link it to similar contemporary social movements, which tend to ‘transcend the nation-state’ such as Occupy, and where ‘thousands of social interactions take place’. Thus, the links of the Queeristan festival with other social movements are presented with slides. Apart from the Occupy movement, the organizers engage theoretically with the Blockupy event, which is taking place at the same time in Frankfurt.19

[...]

The discussion then turns to the links of queer politics with more institutional gay-rights politics, represented, according to the organizers, by the LGBT movement. They claim that since ‘the production of the Common should stay relatively open’, queer, as an anti-identitarian political stance, fits with the political idea of the ‘commons’, because it is an open category. In contrast, they claim, traditional LGBT politics, which tend to focus on gay rights, have a very limited scope manifested in their identitarian logics, and therefore LGBT cannot be included within the category of ‘commons’.20

At the Queeristan festival of 2012, one of the most enthusiastically followed workshops was entitled ‘From Precarity to the Common: Proceeding from Anti-Capitalist Struggles’. The workshop had as objective to ‘explore recent discussions on the notion of the common in relation to anti-capitalist struggle’.21 The rationale of the workshop was expressed in three points. First, queer politics needs sustained reflection on urgent points of resistance, and notions of community and autonomy. The workshop claimed that, central as they are in queer politics, these issues need to be debated through a ‘new communist perspective’. Moreover, the organizers wanted to raise two other points: first, on reflections on the emergence of the ‘precariat’; second, on the critical production of discourses on communism as a strategy to use against dominant neoliberal narratives.

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19 The Blockupy movement is a European-wide network organized to ‘break the rule of austerity and build democracy and solidarity from below’. It became very active during the Eurozone economic crisis. Blockupy violent demonstrations took place in Frankfort, the German city where the European Central Bank is based, during my fieldwork in the Queeristan festival in 2012. For more information, view its website: https://blockupy.org/ (last accessed: 16/06/2017).

20 Field Notes, Amsterdam, May 2012.

We saw in the previous section that an anti-capitalist critique is not part of festivals’ callouts. There are voices, however, among the actors who address these critiques and attempt to bring new ‘communist’ perspectives in queer festivals. Activists and participants in the festivals often hold several political identities and memberships in different social movement groups across Europe and beyond. Many have been part of far-left groups (anarchist, anti-authoritarian, anti-fascist, etc.). Their participation in these groups reflects the way queer publics identify in political terms. In the online survey of the Oslo Queer Festival, more than three quarters of the respondents affirmed that they position themselves in the most radical parts of the left (80%). Moreover, apart from their political identifications in terms of left-right, many activists feel connected to subcultures, such as punk, gay leather, and drag queen scenes, as is revealed through the interviews. These identifications with other left-wing movements and their participation in subcultures often makes actors wonder why the capitalist system is not criticized so much, and how different aspects of intersectionality can be linked not only with gender and sexuality but also with capitalism and economic exploitation.

The anti-capitalist critique and connections with queer politics were mostly addressed in the Queeristan festivals. The introduction of the anti-capitalist critique, through the theories of the ‘commons’ was largely influenced by the presence of specific actors who attempted to integrate it in the festival. This attempt relates to these actors’ academic training and political involvement in other social movements. We can argue therefore that queer festivals are spaces in which this sort of debate and critique is possible, but remains upon the discretion of specific actors. The Queeristan festival is an illustrative example of how actors who engage in left-wing theories, through their educational socialization and their diversified political involvement in other left-wing movements, can stimulate the festivals’ identity-work with political theories of the left. In this respect, anti-capitalist critique does not seem to be a constitutive part of current European queer festivals, as was the case with Queeruption (Brown 2007). Its integration appears more as the result of contingent factors, such as the presence of specific actors with relevant concerns.

The scarce anti-capitalist discourses do not signify, however, a complete absence of their practical effects in the festivals. Queer festivals organize in fact their identity-work through the politics of the commons, more at the...
level of practice than at the level of discourse. For instance, ‘the sharing and gifting of skills, knowledge, and affection’ that Brown (2009: 1505) describes for the previous decade’s Queeruption gatherings, applies to the current queer festivals, too. Festivals open the path for skill sharing and affective relations. We could mention the bike-repairing spaces, the collective cooking and eating, the provision of accommodation. Moreover, the whole political economy of the festivals is based on a certain idea of commons. Communal kitchens, for instance, are based on food products offered by local neighbouring commerce, or through the process of dumpster-diving in big supermarket chains. In addition, the specific organization patterns of the queer festivals inform us about their links with the politics of the commons. As we saw in the previous chapter, DIY blurs the boundaries between organizers and ‘consumers’, albeit without avoiding the configuration of new power relations. Moreover, the squatted spaces which host the festivals offer the possibilities for queer events to create community resources and to link with other social movements of the squatting scenes, without paying for the organization of the events. Finally, the transnational character of the festivals allows activists who acquire or share skills to take them back to their ‘home’ communities.

The politics of the commons is also linked to queer anti-identitarianism. The organizers of the ‘From Precarity to the Commons’ workshop discussed queer as being different from ‘traditional’ LGBT politics, by using the argument of the ‘commons’. This is a characteristic illustration of the rapprochement queer festivals make with anti-capitalist critiques. So, although scarce, the anti-capitalist critique can be, and sometimes is, integrated into queer festivals. But this happens mostly through actors’ contingent interest in it.

**Conclusion**

I explored in this chapter the process of identity-work of queer festivals, from the viewpoint of discursive conventions. Through the discussion on two dimensions of festivals’ identity-work, I demonstrated that queer festivals respond to their anti-identitarian identity, through the promotion of frames of autonomization from the LGBT movement and through the promotion of inclusivity. Moreover, I showed how discourse and practices of autonomy and the commons can be part of festivals’ anti-identitarian building. Hence, through their collective actions, queer festivals reproduce this distinction against LGBT ‘mainstream’ publics (Bernstein 1997).
In order to distinguish analytically the dimensions which are present in the identity-work of queer festivals, I regrouped them broadly as follows: a) The anti-identitarian aspect and b) Autonomy and the politics of commons. First, the discourse of moving beyond sexual and gender identities is that dimension of queer festivals’ identity-work which links them to the historical legacy of queer politics, as it developed after the 1980s, and to their ideological legacy of queer theory, as it developed in the American universities during the same period. By using a discourse which opposes rigid and fixed identities in order to promote fluidity in the forms that gender and sexuality can take, queer festivals conform to the model of queer theory as it was built within universities after the late 1980s. This discursive legacy is portrayed in the callouts of the festivals when they address an unknown public, thus setting the first demarcation points for the construction of the boundaries of collective identity. I also demonstrated that the anti-identitarian discourse is enriched by a narrative of inclusivity and anti-normativity, which includes the fight against both heteronormativity but also homonormativity. Concerning activists’ interpretations on the matter, they tend to reproduce this anti-identitarian idea. Depending on their educational capital, they either emphasize the ‘destabilization’ character of queerness (university students), or they attribute a more practical sense of an ‘alternative’ lifestyle, a counter-culture which is ‘different’ from the mainstream gay one (no university education).

Moreover, actors participating in the festivals have been trying to integrate anti-capitalist critiques and make it part of the queer anti-identitarian identity by advancing theories on the commons. Although this discursive engagement is scarce and contingent upon those actors, the politics of the commons is much more present in festivals’ practices. The horizontal and DIY organization, which blurs the boundaries between organizers and ‘consumers’, as we saw in Chapter 3, is one of such set of practices that festivals engage with.

By organizing themselves through different sets of discourses, festivals do not deny as irrelevant their collective identity. But this identity does not derive from a supposedly subaltern status of participants (Fraser 1990). Festivals rather attempt to build more coherent identities through the mobilization of political theories, as they are formulated and circulate within academic institutions and social movement scenes. Although queer theory still constitutes one of the legitimate ideological holders of the events’ identity, new political ideas are gradually introduced. These ideas originate from theories on autonomy and the commons. Therefore, can we say that a certain degree of de-queerization is currently underway, in the sense
that queer theory does not hold the ideological monopoly of these events anymore? This is hard to assert for the moment, and new insights from the development of these theories in queer festivals need to be brought in.

Having identified the ways queer festivals publicly present themselves, and the way their members think about ‘queerness’, and having presented the significance of discourses for the construction of queer festivals’ collective identity, the following chapter discusses the importance of cultural practices for the building of queer festivals’ anti-identitarian identity.