



Gay tourism to Tel-Aviv: Producing urban value?

Gilly Hartal

McGill University, Canada

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Abstract

Over the past decade, a growing number of critiques have been levelled at institutional LGBT initiatives in Tel-Aviv, characterising them as homonational and pinkwashing. Gay tourism to Tel-Aviv is one of the central initiatives under attack. Supported by national ministries and by local organisations, Tel-Aviv became a popular destination for a 'gay vacation'. This paper explores the dynamic formation of the political economy of gay tourism to Tel-Aviv, underscoring the impact queer tourism has on Israeli LGBT politics and specifically on urban LGBT politics in Tel-Aviv. Particularly, this paper critically discusses neoliberal urban politics of LGBT value and valuation and its break from rights politics. I claim that the processes responsible for the increase in gay tourism to Tel-Aviv engendered confusion between rights achievements and recognition anchored in other kinds of national and municipal support (mainly allocations), encouraging fragmentation within the Israeli LGBT community. This process reproduced capitalist logics in urban spaces and constructed LGBT individuals as valued products based on their promotion of the urban space to other gay tourists, producing Tel-Aviv as a gay heaven and as a homonational hub. If the state works on the national level to create 'pure' homonationalism, the kind of homonationalism created on the urban level is an *economic homonationalism*: where the neoliberal agenda influences decision-making rather than questions of national belonging. Meaning that the effects of homonormativity are (becoming, once again) more significant within homonationalist political configurations.

Keywords

gay tourism, homonationalism, LGBT in Israel, LGBT rights, urban politics

摘要

过去十年中，特拉维夫的机构化同志文化（LGBT）举措越来越多受到批评，它们被定性为“同性恋国民主义”和“粉红清洗”。特拉维夫的同性恋旅游是受到攻击的中心举措之一。在国家部委和地方组织的支持下，特拉维夫已成为“同性恋假期”的热门目的地。本文探讨了特拉维夫同性恋旅游政治经济学的动态构成，强调了酷儿旅游对以色列 LGBT 政治的影响，尤其是对特拉维夫城市 LGBT 政治的影响。具体而言，本文批判性地探讨了 LGBT 价值观和价值评估所隐含的新自由主义城市政治，以及这一政治与权利政治的脱离。本文指出，导致特拉维夫同性恋旅游增加的过程引起了权利成就与其他种类的国家 and 市政支持（主要是拨款）所含的承认之间的混淆，从而推动了以色列 LGBT 社群内的分化。这个过程再现了城市空间中的资本主义逻辑，并将 LGBT 个体构建为有价值的产品，其价值依据是向其他同性恋游客宣传城市空间的力度，从而将特拉维夫打造为同性恋天堂和同性恋国民主义中心。如果说国家是在全国层面创造“纯粹”的同性恋国民主义，那么在城市层面创造的同性恋国民主义就是一种经济上的同性恋国民主义，新自由主义议程在这里影响的只是决策，而不是国民归属问题。这意味着同性恋规范化效应在同性恋国民主义政治格局中（再次）发挥更显著作用。

关键词

同性恋旅游、同性恋国民主义、以色列 LGBT、LGBT 权利、城市政治

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Introduction

This paper focuses on neoliberal interests and logics that produce a form of valuation and construct urban lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) politics of normalisation and containment. Through a case study of the promotion of gay tourism to Tel-Aviv and the Tel-Aviv Pride Parade, I present and analyse a sequence of events that took place in early 2016, showing how neoliberal politics combined with homonationalism are constructing a new urban politics of LGBT value. As I will expand upon later, 'homonationalism' refers to a combination of national inclusion (and exclusion) processes and neoliberal assimilation (homonormativity) processes (Puar, 2007; Schotten, 2016).

Cities have always been key players in the creation of sexual subcultures. Natalie Oswin (2015) emphasises that the association of urbanisation processes with LGBT liberalism requires further consideration, specifically pointing to the 'emergence of troubling alignments of liberal queer political strategies with urban modes of governance that are often inseparable from neoliberal, racist, nationalist, and militarist logics' (p. 560). Following this insight, this paper examines a specific progression of LGBT urban politics in Tel-Aviv, one that is rooted in a neoliberal logic that generates new understandings of LGBT individuals' 'progress' that has little to do with concrete improvements in their legal rights or social status.

To do that, I ask: what are the cultural, economic, political and spatial implications of gay tourism to Tel-Aviv, and what power dynamics does it entail? More specifically, I

ask: how does the strategic branding of Tel-Aviv as a global city that particularly invites gay tourists affect the city's sociocultural landscape and local (municipal and national) LGBT politics? Finally, how does the neoliberal logic that undergirds gay tourism initiatives produce the LGBT rights discourse in Israel?

Over the past decade, a growing number of critiques have been levelled at institutional LGBT initiatives in Tel-Aviv, characterising them as homonational and pinkwashing (Gross, 2015; Hartal and Sasson-Levy, 2016). 'Pinkwashing' refers to inclusion of LGBTs into the nation, painting the state as liberal and democratic while legitimising violent policies towards countries portrayed as less tolerant of LGBTs. Gay tourism to Tel-Aviv is one of the central initiatives under attack. Supported at the local and national level, Tel-Aviv has become a popular destination for a 'gay vacation' since the beginning of the century as Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality's Department of Tourism, in conjunction with the *Aguda*, the national Israeli LGBT association, have initiated several campaigns aimed at promoting gay tourism to Tel-Aviv. In this paper, I argue that neoliberal urban politics of LGBT value are diverging from rights politics, creating a qualitative change and a new urban LGBT politics of capital submerged in a specific kind of homonationalism.

I present findings from a research study that explores the dynamic formation of the political economy of gay tourism to Tel-Aviv, underscoring the impact queer tourism has on Israeli LGBT politics. A political economy approach focuses on the

Corresponding author:

Gilly Hartal, The Department of Geography, McGill University, Brunside Hall Building, Room 614, 805 Sherbrooke West, Montreal QC H3A0B9, Canada.

Email: gillyrachely@gmail.com

amalgamation of economy, law, society and urban geography to express the understanding that discourses on sexuality are simultaneously constituted along the lines of these dynamic processes. I claim that the processes involved in the increase in gay tourism to Tel-Aviv engendered confusion between rights achievements and recognition anchored in other kinds of national and municipal support, encouraging fragmentation within the Israeli LGBT community. Using spaces that were once mobilised to enable a queer oppositional culture, this political process reproduced capitalist logics in urban spaces and constructed LGBT individuals as valued products solely based on their promotion of the urban space of Tel-Aviv to other gay tourists, reproducing Tel-Aviv as a gay heaven and as a homonational hub. As I will show later, there are inconsistencies between state and urban politics which, in different ways, all take part in the production of homonationalism and homonormative politics. While the Municipality's homonational roll is to be the intermediate factor between the LGBT community, its organisations and the state, neoliberal politics ensure that municipal politics side with the LGBT community against the government, and at the same time, reflect to the LGBT organisations what the boundaries of their role in decision making are.

Gay tourism as urban homonational politics

The relationship between global cities and LGBT cultures and their status as spaces of belonging for LGBT individuals and for political and social LGBT organisations and culture is a well-studied phenomenon (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Brown, 2008; Chauncey, 2008; Delaney, 1999; Knopp, 1998). Hubbard et al. (2016) show that sexuality is a primary and fundamental force in everyday life in cities. Other scholars (e.g. Bell

and Binnie, 2004; Binnie, 2001; Markwell, 2002; Rushbrook, 2002) note that during the past decade, there has been a major turnaround, with government, municipal and business support of LGBT tolerance added to the mix, enabling LGBT politics and culture to metaphorically 'step into the light' to be happily promoted by local establishments. Throughout this process, Oswin (2015: 558) claims, 'sexual difference is increasingly marshalled as a symbol of progress and modernity for the purposes of fostering national and urban competitiveness in various contexts'. Examining this relationship between urban processes and LGBT politics, Blank and Rozen-Zvi (2012) claim that the increased impact of local governments on LGBT lives is a consequence of a lack of federal government regulations, empowering cities to extend their power (either through recognition or discrimination). They call this process the 'localization of sexuality' (p. 958), in which cities respond to the needs and interests of their LGBT dwellers.

LGBT tourism is essential to the understanding of LGBT politics of urban space. The premise that tourism (and pride parades as a major attraction) is an apolitical socio-spatial phenomenon has been challenged and rejected (Binnie and Klesse, 2011; Browne, 2007; de Jong, 2016; Waitt and Stapel, 2011). The field of LGBT tourism intersects discourses of travel, capitalism and consumerism with cultural criticism (Puar, 2002). Moreover, it reflects an assemblage of discourses on modern citizenship (Bell, 1994), marketing and identity politics (Coon, 2012; Johnston, 2005), which have not yet been discussed in the context of Tel-Aviv. Specifically, the critical research of LGBT tourism examines the alignments of the state and liberal LGBT politics, bolstering particular kinds of gayness and encouraging normativity (Johnston, 2005; Waitt and Markwell, 2006; Waitt et al., 2008). More broadly, this field is related to what Lisa

Duggan (2002) calls the *new homonormativity*: a politics that does not challenge heteronormative assumptions and manifestations such as patriarchy or neoliberalism, while reproducing hierarchies of sexualities. Nathaniel Lewis (2016) argues that in a (homo)normative order, we can assume that middle-class gay men and lesbians aspire to assimilate.

Critical of the lack of nuance and extrapolated reading of homonormativity, Gavin Brown (2009, 2012) argues practices of resistance should be recognised and researchers should consider how homonormativity functions in specific contexts. This paper offers a situated and subtle reading of the politics of Israeli gay tourism in 2016, not assuming all manifestations of homonormativity are dangerous or wrong, but, at the same time, pursuing a critical perspective on assimilation and compliance with state politics.

Furthermore, extending power relations within LGBT communities, geographers of sexualities (Nast, 2002) have outlined the allegiance, and even partnership, gay men have with the state, deepening normativity even further and creating homonational nodes. The term *homonationalism* was coined by Jusbir Puar (2007) and has since gained broad acceptance among both scholars and activists (Schotten, 2016). Initially, Puar outlined homonationalism as a combination of nationality and normativity. Nationality being a mode of belonging to the nation-state, and normativity in its specific meaning as an LGBT assimilation practice informed by narratives of consumerism and domesticity (Duggan, 2002), signalling neoliberal sexual politics and its practice by LGBT individuals. This analysis of the state as not merely heteronormative and patriarchal, as feminist scholars claim (Nagel, 2010; Walby, 1994; Young, 2003), but also as confining and constructing homosexuality, uncovered the ubiquitous agency of homonationalism

in assimilating LGBT individuals into the national collective.

For the purpose of this study, homonationalism is a particularly productive term in that it refers to a dynamic binary process of inclusion and exclusion. While specific groups are marked with the 'correct' belonging and deemed normal, others are distanced from the public sphere and deemed perverse. Thus, mainstreaming excludes by ignoring inequality in attitudes towards major sections of the LGBT community. Moreover, LGBT subgroups who receive equal rights by adopting the hegemonic ideology strengthen the legitimate belonging of LGBT individuals to the nation. In turn, expanding the nation's boundaries and including LGBT groups within it serves to portray the state as tolerant and liberal while simultaneously marking other states as intolerant, undemocratic and illiberal. This process legitimises violent policies towards countries portrayed as less tolerant of LGBT individuals and other minorities, a process better known as pinkwashing (Schulman, 2012). Another substantial aspect of homonationalism is what Gross (2015) names 'homomunicipalism', to mark activists who participate in municipal establishments (municipal board members, etc.). Gross sees this political formation as part of homonationalism; however, as I will show, there is a significant gap between homonationalism and its urban manifestations.

Homonationalism, as a prominent concept within geographies of sexualities, has been misused (Zanghellini, 2012). Using homonationalism to discuss Tel-Aviv, however, cannot be understood as a wrong application of the concept since Tel-Aviv is a space of conspicuous homonationalism (Hartal and Sasson-Levy, 2017), where homonationalism is impossible to ignore. In this paper, homonationalism is analysed through the differentiation between municipal and state use of gay tourism, enabling a

nuanced reading and avoiding unsubstantiated discussion or oversimplifications.

In the rest of this paper, I investigate the workings of LGBT neoliberal discourses in the Tel-Aviv urban context, its projection onto LGBT politics and its use by activists, municipal officials and commercial players as produced by the socio-spatial process of gay tourism. This process is contingent upon the intensification of LGBT individuals' urban value and diverting LGBT liberation projects from previous liberal courses of rights' claims.

Methodology

This qualitative research relies on ethnographic methods (Till, 2009). In order to achieve a triangulation of data, the field work was comprised of semi-structured interviews, direct/participant observations, textual analysis and an archival investigation, carried out between May 2015 and August 2016.

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors, such as gay tourism agency owners, municipal employees, gay club owners, hotel managers directly marketing to gays, and Tourism Ministry officials. Interviews lasted from one to three hours, were recorded and transcribed. Interviewees were presented with the option of reviewing the interview transcription, and when requested, the transcription was sent to participants for approval. Although it is unusual, and because most participants are public well-known local figures who wanted credit for their statements, all participants signed a written consent form, agreeing to the use of their real names in the article.

In addition to the interviews, direct/participant observations were conducted between May and August 2016. The observations took place in relevant government committees and activist meetings and other political settings related to gay tourism. During the

summer season, observations were conducted at prominent gay tourism scenes such as the Tel-Aviv Pride Parade, gay parties and clubs, and day tours promoted exclusively to gay tourists. Finally, I examined a variety of media sources and material produced for promoting gay tourism to Tel-Aviv, including national and local newspapers, the Tel-Aviv Gay Center website, the *Aguda* website, and a gay dating portal that advertises gay tourism.

The archival investigation concentrated on examining government and municipal records of decision-making processes regarding gay tourism – most of this work was conducted at the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality archive, and led to a broader understanding of the process of gay tourism since its inception in 2000.

I began my fieldwork with in-depth knowledge of the activist LGBT community stemming from years of activism and research. Even so, entering the field of gay tourism, I was introduced to new settings and politics, unfamiliar to my Jewish–women–LGBT activist's perspective. This positioned me as an outsider, necessitating me to gain the trust of both the interviewees and especially their secretaries, who meticulously managed access to their bosses.

The qualitative analysis process of the collected data entailed coding and thematic analysis for emerging and recurring themes and categories (Ryan and Bernard, 2000). The analysis process focused on neoliberal urban politics and the question of how neoliberal interests and logics produce LGBT urban politics and value.

Introducing Israeli LGBT national and urban politics

Even though Tel-Aviv, Israel's urban centre, is different in many ways from the country's overall sociocultural climate regarding issues of sexualities, notions of tolerance towards

LGBT individuals and LGBT belonging as an integral part of the nation-state are growing in importance nationwide. This incorporation or cooptation of LGBT individuals into the national collective is performed using readily available social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion such as military service. Israel is a militaristic society in which masculinity plays a focal role in the construction of identities that produce participation in and belonging to the state (Sasson-Levy and Rapoport, 2003). Moreover, since service in the Israeli military is compulsory for Jewish men and women alike it serves as the most basic measure of acceptance into Israeli-Jewish society (Berkovitch, 1999). Despite sporadic incidents of harassment and homophobia, Jewish LGBT individuals normally serve in the military, and as Aeyal Gross (2015) suggests, their identification with the nation and state goes without saying.

Over the last three decades, the Israeli LGBT community has matured, achieved legal recognition, developed a network of self-help and sociopolitical organisations, and held annual pride events in major cities. The decriminalisation of sodomy in 1988 catalysed and facilitated the local gay legal revolution (Harel, 1999). Since then, many LGBT rights have been enshrined through legislation and litigation. Four years later, amendments preventing discrimination based on sexual orientation in the labour market were added to the law. In 2004, the Supreme Court ruled that a gay man can inherit his deceased spouse's assets; since 2005, the state recognises same-sex parental adoption of non-biological children (provided they are biologically related to one of the parents); and in 2006, a Supreme Court verdict enabled formal registration in the population registry of same-sex marriages conducted abroad. This political atmosphere allowed for the continuation and growth of LGBT organisations and

assimilationist politics. Simultaneously, radical, anti-assimilationist politics emerged, integrating queer discourses with an anti-occupation agenda and criticising the call for equality by a state. Today, even though Israel does not recognise same-sex marriage, it does recognise LGBT relationships, and grants other LGBT personal rights. Moreover, since 1988, LGBTs have become increasingly visible in the media and even in highly symbolic spheres such as the military (Kama, 2011).

The Israeli LGBT community also fits into a general trend of NGOisation through which organisations implement social services and national identity as a part of neo-liberal governmentality. Today, there are over 30 LGBT organisations in Israel, almost all of them in Tel-Aviv. Adi Moreno (2011) introduced a classification of LGBT organisations into five categories: advocacy organisations that aim to change policy, such as the *Aguda* and the *Jerusalem Open House*; professional support groups providing both social and psychological support for different identity groups, such as *The Gila Project*, an organisation that helps transgender individuals with finding work, apartments and more, *IGY*, the Israeli LGBT youth organisation and *Hoshen*, which provides educational services within the state education system; and identity groups, which are mostly non-institutionalised organisations. Amongst these are the religious Jewish LGBT organisations and Palestinian organisations as well as bisexual and asexual groups. The fourth classification of organisations is local support groups and the fifth is gay political-party cells. All the organisations have extensive interactions with one another mostly at times of major controversies or through working together on pride parades.

The advocacy and support organisations, local support groups and some of the identity groups are partly municipal or state

funded. This categorisation does not reflect the level of institutionalisation per se but mainly demonstrates their nationalism. In other words, to receive funding from the state, organisations need to identify with the national ideology and the state's actions. Therefore, some groups, mainly Palestinian groups and pro-BDS¹ activists, do not take part in this process of containment. This situation, therefore, lends itself to a segmentation of LGBT politics in which some organisations take part and benefit from institutionalised support while others protest or completely disregard the state. Nevertheless, the state has a principal role in producing LGBT politics and homonationalism. Here, for example, are some of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's remarks in a recent session of the UN General Assembly on 22 September 2016, referring to the boycott on Israel:

Are the gays hanging from cranes in Iran helped by your denigration of Israel? That same Israel where gays march proudly in our streets and serve in our parliament, including, I'm proud to say, in my own Likud party.

Gross (2015) claims that LGBT rights demonstrate the struggle over liberal democracy in Israel. This struggle is directly linked to pinkwashing, in which public officials and others champion gay rights for the sole purpose of being able to claim that Israel is a liberal state, as opposed to the 'primitive' and traditional Middle East, especially Iran and the Palestinian Authority.

Despite the emergence of scholarship focusing on homonationalism in Israel (Gross, 2015; Puar, 2011; Ritchie, 2015), most of the critical social research on Israeli geographies of sexualities is preoccupied with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Ellison, 2013; Ritchie, 2015), or with urban activism (Misgav, 2015, 2016a, 2016b) to the relative neglect of neoliberalism, hence the lack of

literature on the implications gay tourism has for Tel-Aviv. In another vein, Allweil and Kallus (2013) show how studies of cities in Israel identified them as sites of struggle over inclusion into the nation, claiming more research examining the city's role in producing bodies and nation is required.

Following this call and moving the focus from the state to the urban scale, like other Western urban centres, Tel-Aviv promotes its LGBT presence and inclusivity, indirectly bolstering modern-liberal narratives of progress to improve its international image as a place of tolerance that encourages diversity while promoting its economic interests. Tel-Aviv is thought of as *the* place for LGBT individuals, a space of belonging, a 'gay heaven', with many gay commercial spaces, an annual pride parade sponsored by the municipality as part of its campaign to promote gay tourism to Tel-Aviv. Moreover, a municipal Gay Center in the heart of the city symbolises, maintains and reproduces the community's growing sociopolitical power (Hartal and Sasson-Levy, 2016).

While it is not spatially demarcated like many other cities in the Global North (Brown, 2013; Castells, 1983; Doan and Higgins, 2011; Nash, 2013; Podmore, 2001), Tel-Aviv has recently witnessed a radical change in its media status and branding. In 2011, for example, Tel-Aviv won American Airlines' Best Gay City contest, with 43% of the votes.² In 2010, the municipal Department of Tourism, together with *Aguda* and the Ministry of Tourism, initiated the Tel-Aviv Gay Vibe campaign, to promote North American and Western European gay tourism to Tel-Aviv. The substantial investment was perceived as potentially lucrative and as an indicator that gay issues were part of a strategy for changing public opinion of Israel worldwide. During the summer of 2012, an estimated 25,000 gay tourists descended on the city, spending about US\$50 million in total, a 20% increase over the previous



Figure 1. Left: Response to the rejection of the civil marriage bill. (The meme says: Forget gay marriage—here's a gay limo!)

Right: Response to the rejection of recognition of bereaved LGBT widowers. (The meme says: Instead of equal rights in bereavement – here's a coloured tank!)

summer.³ In 2016, the Ministry of Tourism allocated NIS11 million for the promotion of gay tourism to Tel-Aviv, confirming the government's clear support.

Progress or gain? The case of the 2016 gay tourism campaign to Tel-Aviv

In this section, I claim that the unification of Tel-Aviv and the State's stances on LGBT issues obscures the deliberate politics of gay tourism, constructed as a fusion of homo-normativity and pinkwashing. To do so, I will introduce and analyse the politics of gay tourism and the pride parade in Tel-Aviv in 2016. Tel-Aviv is framed as a unique space, a 'bubble', the opposite of all other space in Israel. A conservative society that blurs the separation of church and state, Israel represents a dissonance between a (mostly) traditional society and the (visuals of) acceptance of LGBT individuals and politics within Tel-Aviv. The misconception that the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality espouses the official stance of the Israeli government and reflects the common social atmosphere on

LGBT issues leads LGBT individuals to erroneously think that the municipal and government support of gay tourism also means support of LGBT issues in general. Chen Arieli, the *Aguda* chairwoman, said in an interview:

Ron Huldai [Tel-Aviv Mayor] is the [LGBT] community's prime minister. He does whatever Bibi [Benjamin Netanyahu – Israel's Prime Minister] doesn't do. He allocates to the [LGBT] organizations.

Suggesting Tel-Aviv is the gay capital, Arieli points to the fact that the ability to make decisions and propel change is dependent on allocations, hinting at what was to come.

The beginning of this paradoxical story was in February 2016, with the first ever LGBT rights day at the Knesset (Israeli parliament). This seemingly momentous and joyous atmosphere of inclusion and LGBT visibility was undermined the very next day by a rejection of the civil marriage bill and proposal to recognise a bereaved widower in same-sex couples. The *Aguda* responded with a viral campaign (see Figure 1), demanding the government increase allocations and promote LGBT equality.

The campaign protested the gap between Israel's image as a liberal place and its use for promoting homonationalism, and the actual situation of LGBT inequality. One month later, *Ynet*, a major daily news website, announced that the Ministry of Tourism would invest NIS11 million (a little over US\$3 million) in a short- and long-term campaign promoting gay tourism to Tel-Aviv. The LGBT tourism industry, consisting largely of male gay tourists, has a multi-million-dollar turnover (Community Marketing Inc., 2016). In 2011, the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality estimated the revenues from gay tourism to be NIS200 million (approximately US\$55.5 million) per year with average expenditures of US\$1800 per tourist, 50% more than a heterosexual tourist. The Municipality estimates 50,000 gay tourists arrive a year, while the city's population is just 432,900 (as of the end of 2015) (CBS, 2015).

This unprecedented sponsorship met with conflicting responses from the LGBT community, ranging from criticism and anger over what was perceived as an incorrect distribution of financial support: spending the money on tourism campaigns instead of on support of Israeli LGBT advocacy and support organisations, to criticism over the not-so-hidden government agenda of pinkwashing, to celebration of the LGBT community's success as represented by this official recognition. In an interview, Chen Arieli gave her assessment of the situation:

We had the data to know that all the [LGBT] organizations together receive less than NIS 2m [approximately US\$520,000]. The gap was obvious. Organizations are collapsing here. There is no reason to brag about Tel-Aviv and more generally about Israel [...] being a country that is good for LGBT individuals [...]. There is a lot of work to be done here and not that many statutory rights. Most of the rights we have were achieved in court where precedents were established, meaning that most of the legislation is declarative. Most of our achievements are



Figure 2. Billboard in Piccadilly Circus, London, April 2016 (photograph: Noam Roth).

despite successive Israeli governments. Suddenly along comes this current government and uses the LGBT community without doing much to promote us. [...] So, when this article was published on *Ynet*, there was rage [...] and we gathered all the organizations and wrote a sharp letter to the prime minister stating that it is inconceivable that there is such a ridiculous gap between the budget that touts the LGBT community and the actual support it receives, clearly there is a problem here.

The *Aguda* also responded in the media by saying that it was gratifying to have government support, and called for other government offices and ministries to follow suit. In line with the pinkwashing agenda, the gay tourism campaign to Israel is promoted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality and has also been promoted by the *Aguda*. A previous campaign, launched in 2005, aimed to replace Israel's image as a Middle-Eastern, religious and militaristic desert state with an image of Israel as a modern, cutting-edge Western liberal country (particularly in contrast to Palestine and other Arab countries).

2016's campaign began with billboards saying: 'Imagine London/Berlin/Madrid without gays ...' inviting criticism of those who call for the deportation of gays. This was supposed to be followed by the second part of the campaign, which would be the answer to the question of where did all the gays go? Obviously, to Tel-Aviv. Even though the minister of tourism cancelled the campaign, the problematic ads from both parts of the campaign still ended up on billboards for all to see (see Figure 2).

Two weeks after the cancellation of the campaign posters, while social media platforms were still raging, the Ministry of Tourism announced a plan to fly a rainbow-painted aircraft with gay tourists, bloggers and journalists to Tel-Aviv. By now, even the advocates who had supported the campaign thought it was problematic. The idea of an aircraft was practically a PR gift to LGBT organisations, who were already putting together a statement framing their objections to the allocation of funding. Chen Arieli explained in an interview:

The airplane revealed the absurd, the gap [between the money we receive and the money they make exploiting our presence in Tel-Aviv]. Now we had an image of a rainbow-colored plane, a meme. [...] This plane was a present to us.

Investing NIS11 million to promote gay tourism was controversial to begin with, but using this funding for a rainbow-coloured aircraft was considered extravagant. It symbolised an essential difference in values – while the LGBT community thought the investment was a sign of acceptance and normalisation, the government wanted to invest in promoting Israel's image. Mickey Gitzin, a city councilman, was critical of government allocations for gay tourism promotion after the 2014 Israel – Gaza conflict. In an interview, he said:

The tourism ministry is ready to invest money to bring homosexuals and lesbians to Tel-Aviv to 'clean' the latest war. The war reduced the number of tourists and the LGBT community is just a tool to achieve this [goal].

Gitzin describes the militaristic-nationalistic background in which the promotion of gay tourism is taking place, revealing the unabashed use of the LGBT community for pinkwashing. Pini Shani, the deputy head of marketing at the Ministry of Tourism, added in an interview:

It is clear that the goal is to bring people to Tel-Aviv, to Israel and not to promote the [LGBT] community.

Both Gitzin and Shani assume that promoting LGBTs is promoting Tel-Aviv and vice versa. They show that both share the same interests. Yaniv Weizman, a city councilman and the mayor's advisor on LGBT issues, posted on Facebook:

If the state of Israel wants to build a partnership with the gay community like the partnership the community has had with the Tel-Aviv Municipality in recent decades, they have to understand it comes with a price, and this price does not come down to tourism campaign financing. We need real investments in the community, in community organizations and in promoting full equality for LGBT individuals.

As opposed to claiming rights on the basis of citizenship or discrimination, what was implicit in Weizman's post was the use of the community's economic value to attract tourists and construct the 'sexiness' of Tel-Aviv's urban space. Weizman stresses that Tel-Aviv's interests are not one and the same as the LGBT community's interests, and that the appropriation of LGBT culture in Tel-Aviv should address not only the state, but the community itself. Hila Oren, the CEO and founder of Tel-

Aviv Global & Tourism, a Municipality-owned company, described in an interview:

There wasn't a kiosk in Tel-Aviv that didn't have a rainbow flag. I mean, people understand this through their pockets. Talking about numbers, owners understand that when they put up a [rainbow] flag more tourist customers come to buy cigarettes at their kiosk [...]. We know that the gay community spends 25–30% more than other tourists, they have 'free' money.

Michal Eden, the first lesbian city councilwoman and an LGBT rights lawyer, added in an interview:

As soon as the municipality understood that there was economic potential, and they saw the tourists coming to Tel-Aviv hotels with money to spend [...] it was as if it came from the top ... Senior and elected officials understood that even if they didn't really like homosexuals they should be nice to them and give them money. The hotel union was not that open-minded either, but they understood that putting a [rainbow] flag up was worthwhile.

The LGBT community's economic power in Tel-Aviv would now be used to create economic profit for the city and promote Zionist propaganda, while allowing the LGBT community to negotiate what the LGBT organisations would get in return.

With a lot of confusion about who the allies and rivals were, the political climate was ripe for action. The *Aguda* recruited Ron Huldai, Tel-Aviv's mayor, to the cause and he and the LGBT organisations decided to announce a cancellation of the pride parade until the LGBT community received a decent budget from the Ministry of Finance. Chen Arieli further described in an interview:

We understood we had to make a dramatic move, so we announced that the pride parade belongs to the community, and not the Tel-Aviv Municipality. We were canceling the

parade. We all knew we couldn't actually cancel the parade ... We don't have that kind of power, but what we could do was threaten to cancel, so we did. We said: This is our limit; we will not be taken for granted or be used at anyone's expense. [...] We went to our friends in the Tel-Aviv Municipality and asked them to join us. [...] The mayor posted a statement on Facebook saying he supported our struggle, but he panicked, he was afraid we were about to cancel the parade and the NIS 180m income to the city.

[...] and then Huldai called Moshe Kahlon [the minister of finance] and said to him: 'Bro, (they probably knew each other from their service in the [Israeli] military or something) help me out here. They're right, help me ... I need this pride parade to take place'. Huldai was afraid and we understood that this was a political opportunity.

What could not be done via legislation and normative politics was accomplished instead by LGBT individuals' symbolic spatial power – the power to cancel the biggest urban street-party in Israel. The mayor was mobilised to act on behalf of the LGBT community, not to demand equality and legislation but to increase the LGBT organisations' budgets. To do so, he uses a military-based network, unveiling military–gender–capitalistic webs of power. Efrat Tolkowsky, a city councilwoman and the producer of the Tel-Aviv pride events that year, reflected in an interview:

We went to the mayor and told him that we might need to make some changes. The city *can* put on the parade without the community [...], but we came to him and said that *this was unreasonable*. He thought NIS 11m was something we should be glad of, so we explained to him why this wasn't so and he sort of understood [...]. We said that we would not work without community involvement and participation [...]. Two days later he calls Yaniv [Weizman] to tell him that he spoke with the Minister of Finance and that he told him that he didn't know the community had no budget,

and the minister said he could transfer NIS 1.5m. This later became the basis for negotiations because the organizations wanted NIS 11m, not 1.5.

The hierarchy is clear – LGBT activists can threaten to cancel the pride parade or use it as a protest tactic since they bring in money for the city, who in turn help the LGBT community organisations receive a very small budget from the government, as long as they keep on being sexy and festive and preserve the urban Middle Eastern flavour of this piece of heaven. Efrat Tolkowsky continued:

There were many who called for a protest, but I restrained myself. I said: The city cannot finance a protest.

What the councilwoman is implying is that because the Tel-Aviv Pride Parade is funded by the Municipality, it could not, in her opinion, become a tool for protest, even though, historically, it is a demonstration for more LGBT rights and an act of rebellion, and not merely a celebration of achievements and sexual freedom. This reading of pride events as a celebration rather than resistance or opposition is widely discussed (Bell and Binnie, 2004; Browne, 2007; Eisner, 2012; Johnston, 2005), questioning the feasibility of commercialised pride parades as appropriate political grounds for activism. Bell and Binnie (2004) go on to claim that gay public space in cities is reduced mainly to expressions of consumption in gentrified neighbourhoods, making gay culture ‘sexy’ in a commercial sense.

The end of this story came in October 2016, when LGBT city council members and activists announced that, following a series of meetings with the minister of finance, it was agreed that LGBT organisations would receive an NIS10 million annual budget. However, this ending remains an ambiguous

one since it keeps getting distorted and undercut.

In December 2016, the budget allocated to the Israel Gay Youth (IGY) organisation by the Ministry of Education was reduced by one-third, resulting in the organisations’ co-directors issuing a statement on social media that they would not be able to continue their activities in the periphery without the complete budget. Paradoxically, it is exactly this kind of change that enhances, rather than eliminates, this Catch-22 situation, in which the remote places have limited resources for LGBT support, yet it is there that they are most needed.

An additional example of the profoundly different priorities can be found in the divergent opinions in the debate over funds versus rights, mostly surrounding parenthood. This specific example occurred in May 2017, when the Israeli Supreme Court discussed a petition regarding establishing parenthood, filed by Orly Weisselberg-Zur, Ravit Zur and the *Aguda*. Israeli law permits a woman to become a legal parent (through means of adoption) of a baby who was born to her female partner following artificial insemination. However, this petition demanded automatic parenthood for such a woman immediately following the child’s birth, as occurs with heterosexual couples. The judges’ attitudes were disrespectful, claiming that the court could establish parenthood but not declare it. Therefore, the parenthood of a non-biological mother does not go into effect prior to the court order, even though it usually takes six months from the time of birth until the court order is handed down. They also opined that the parenthood of a non-biological mother is unnatural; reaching a low point when Judge Meltzer said that this petition actually endangers previous achievements such as being granted parenthood by court order rather than adoption (parenthood is granted without a social welfare services review, shortening the process

and its inconvenience). The judge even recommended to the petitioners that they withdraw their petition as the verdict, in his opinion, would not only rule against the petition, but would also include a harshly worded accompanying statement of opinion that would harm the status of non-biological parenthood.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that the Tel-Aviv pride scene is a successful and profitable one, as a recent article on the *Ynet* news website described:

The British Embassy in Israel will sponsor a float in the Tel-Aviv Pride Parade honoring LGBT families next month. Shaped like a ship waving the Union Jack, the float will transport LGBT families, including the British ambassador, David Quarrey, and his husband. (Eichner, 2017)

The urban celebration of gay freedom continues, tourists visit Tel-Aviv and politicians use this tourism to their benefit and for pinkwashing. Ironically, as the courts declare lesbian motherhood unnatural, the British float is dedicated to LGBT families, which neatly underscores the core argument, revealing a political economy that has harsh consequences for the progression of LGBT rights.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to step back from the controversy itself to analyse what it reveals about the neoliberal urban politics of LGBT value and valuation and its break from rights politics. This shift reflects a logical and qualitative change of value: while LGBT subjects were previously viewed as despicable and shameful, possessing a dangerous, sick and infectious sexuality, now they are viewed as a good urban investment, as subjects who can create economic wealth as well as provide good national PR (read: be used as a tool for pinkwashing). Moreover, since gay tourism brings in so much money for Tel-

Aviv and Israel, there is a consolidation of interests here and the government and the municipality can now invest in the LGBT community without reservations.

However, legislation is a whole different story, and the new resources the community gained in 2016 are not to be confused with securing more rights for the community. The value of the LGBT community is not a civic or human value, it is an economic one, and as such, it is bound by neoliberal logics and confined to the limits of Tel-Aviv's urban politics. Waitt et al. (2008) draw attention to how gay tourism is marketed by national tourism organisations as a way for the neoliberal state to normalise gayness. As I analysed, there is a gap between national and urban LGBT politics. This gap reveals the role the city plays in the construction of homonationalism. As an intermediary, the city acts as the bridge: manipulating LGBT politics to produce LGBT value for its own ends, both for and against the state and its national agenda. It is not the LGBT community that receives the support but, however indirect, the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality. Therefore, I argue that rather than nurture the LGBT community, such resources jeopardise the urban flourishing and diversification of the LGBT community in Tel-Aviv and elsewhere.

The city's role is as an intermediate factor between the national scale and the LGBT community. It is within the urban scale that the value and valuation of LGBT subjects is established, and it is the municipality that catalyses manipulations of local LGBT politics, both for and against the state. Taking this into consideration, the value of LGBT subjects does not create a gap between the local reality and the international image (Markwell, 2002), nor does it serve as a challenge to discourses of visibility (Johnston, 2005). Rather, the municipality bolsters LGBT value, presents it to the state only to refine boundaries to the state. When the

LGBT community promulgates its value for the state to take advantage of, the municipality backs it up against the state, using its power as a city, a power stronger than an NGO's power to protest against state actions/allocations/priorities.

If the state works on the national level to create a clear case of homonationalism, the kind of homonationalism created on the urban level is an *economic homonationalism*: where the neoliberal agenda influences decision-making rather than questions of national belonging. Namely, that the effects of homonormativity are (becoming, once again) more significant within homonationalist political configurations.

It is also important to keep in mind that this kind of economic connection to the state strengthens the strongest segments of the LGBT community, while excluding others (Markwell, 2002). Not all parts of the L, G, B and T community produce these gains, and not all parts of the community have the same access to resources either old or new, thus encouraging gendered, classed, ethnic and national fragmentation within the LGBT community (Browne, 2006; Nast, 2002; Oswin, 2008; Rushbrook, 2002). For example, will these resources be available to gays not serving in the military or to Palestinian LGBT individuals who do not necessarily support the state of Israel and its government?

Furthermore, this kind of political economy generates a disconnection of the state from the urban, facilitating an urban-centric perception that Tel-Aviv is a unique space in Israel, unlike any other place, and thus it demands unique attention. Taking a broader perspective, this process questions the feasibility of the state's ability to represent the interests of its citizens, and specifically, the ability of processes occurring within Tel-Aviv to positively affect LGBT spaces outside of Tel-Aviv – apart from remaining an

imagined space of asylum in times of need, or a dream for a better future (Weston, 1995).

Gay tourism has engendered great appreciation for the LGBT community within the Tel-Aviv 'bubble', precisely because of this amalgamation of interests. However, it is not based on liberal discourses of tolerance or new legislation that catalysed social change but on a conversion of economic capital into symbolic and cultural capital through the use of urban space – the beach, the pride parade, parties and bars. These spaces, which were once mobilised to enable a queer oppositional culture, are now incorporated into a normative neoliberal logic of valuation.

Since this process is rooted in an economic logic, its potential to lead to legislative change is limited. Moreover, it narrows the chances of resistance to and subversion of neoliberal logics because even opposition is met with containment. What is emerging is a new functional normativity and a new kind of resistance, both enmeshed in a logic of LGBT urban value. In other words, opposition is limited to neoliberal contours, reproducing capitalist logics in urban spaces and constructing LGBT individuals as valued products based solely on their promotion of urban space to gay tourists.

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Notes

1. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions, a global campaign to pressure Israel to end the occupation of Palestine.
2. <http://www.gaycities.com/best-of-2011/vote.php?page=10>.
3. Since the Tel-Aviv-Yafo Municipality does not provide data regarding gay tourism and the campaign, the information is based on newspaper articles. See Sade (2011), <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4075141,00.html>. Thus, it is hard to tell if this information is accurate. Nevertheless, the data from the ethnography suggest that the investment made by the municipal and national authorities has paid off in both financial and public relations terms.

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