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When Norwegianness and Norwegian culture are defined in relationship to others, gay rights and tolerance of homosexuality seem to represent it. In a way, Norwegianness is heterosexuals being tolerant towards homosexuals.

An Interview with Åse Røthing

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Åse Røthing: My name is Åse Røthing. I am a researcher for a strategic research program of the University of Oslo, called "Cultural Complexity in Norway." In this program I am working on the construction of "Norwegianness" in school. Part of this work has been to look at how concepts of sexuality and gender equality seem to be markers of Norwegianness, and also to look into how cultural norms seem to be presented in relation to sexual norms. Before that, I did my postdoctoral research on sexual education in secondary schools in Norway, primarily focusing on how heteronormativity is (re)produced in teaching. My main focus was on sexual education, and specifically on how heterosexuality is always taken for granted as the starting point in all discussions and how homosexuality is presented from this position. It wasn't a typical gay and lesbian study, it was more a research done from a queer perspective.

Carlos Motta: Can you explain to me what Norwegianness means in the context of your interests?

AR: The two projects I was working on, on sexual education and on Norwegianness in schools merged. I think that is why I started out with sexuality, because Norwegianness could also be linked to democracy and human rights, all the nice things that tend to be presented as what we have achieved in Norway in opposition to other countries. That was the picture that seemed to be drawn in education when Norway was being compared to the world outside, and we tended to be at the top. I found that really problematic. I have been working on this from a post-colonial perspective, and looking at how this way of presenting the others also reproduced the idea of Norway being the best, having already gotten gender equality and gay and lesbian rights, etc. But it is not that simple. When cultural norms are introduced in relation to gender and sexuality in textbooks, they tend to create a gap between the Norwegian way and the others, the *us* and the *them*, and the story tends to be told in a linear way: We are the end of history in a way, while the others are more or less behind us, they haven't come as far.

One of the stories tells how in the 1800s in Norway, marriage was arranged by the family, and girls had to marry older men. And how this is still common among Muslims, for example. This story is saying that this situation is not that unfamiliar to Norwegian culture, but that it belongs to the past. This way, Muslim families and Muslim girls are being placed in the past: They are still developing while we have sort of come to the end. I find that is a very problematic way of describing something, and the same has happened with gay and lesbian rights and with homosexuality.

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CM: The idea of Norwegianness, as it is taught in schools, is based on issues of national identity, national pride and values?

AR: The current curriculum is a national curriculum established by the Department of Education in 2006 and it has introduced the question of cultural norms in relation to love and marriage. That is more or less its headline. When the textbooks and the teachers are supposed to talk about cultural norms, they start out by the others, and at the same time, in contrast, they are talking about Norwegian norms.

CM: Is the influx of immigrants something that probably has pushed them in this direction?

AR: Yes. Today the curriculum is supposed to be focused on the cultural complexity of the country. This started in the late 1990s, but at that time it was still more focused on individuals coming to Norway as refugees and asylum seekers. The way it was presented in the curriculum to me indicates that they were not seen as somehow influencing Norwegian society. They were only individuals that could possibly become like *us*. That is sort of the implicit way it was dealt with; but now, since 2006, it is more explicit. Nowadays, Norway is a multicultural society, and that is why we had to approach the issue differently.

CM: Who is the *we* and who are the *they*, or the *us* and *them*, in Norway? Are a sexual minorities still considered as such, or because of the advanced sexual rights legislation are they considered as part of the mainstream?

AR: That is one of my main findings. When Norwegianness and Norwegian culture is defined in relationship to others, gay rights and tolerance of homosexuality seem to represent it. In a way, Norwegianness is heterosexuals being tolerant towards homosexuals. But some pictures in the textbooks will create these contrasts. Take a look at this picture in this textbook: This is about ways of living before and now. It is about marriage and families. In one picture, you have two men and a little girl in the middle reading a paper in the park, and in another one, there is a Masai man and a handful of Masai women in the background. It is a really primitive and dark picture. The first picture's caption says that homosexual partnerships are allowed in Norway. The second picture caption's says that Masai men can have several wives. Consequently, they make this opposition between the really pre-modern Masai and the modern Norwegians. The Masai are supposed to be seen as the definite opposite of gender equality, which is the ideal in Norway. One of the interesting things here is that in this picture a gay couple is representing the Norwegians and gender equality, but this book was published before gay couples actually had the right to adopt children. Therefore, this picture is representing Norway as a country that was more gay-friendly than it actually was at the time. It is very paradoxical. But what happens in the chapters about sexuality is different. There are two different sections: one on cultural norms that usually deals with gender and sexuality and another more traditional chapter on sexuality. And in that chapter the *we* is definitely heterosexual.

CM: How is homosexuality taught in schools?

AR: It usually starts out by saying that some people are homosexuals. At this point, it is specifically going from *we* to *they*, which is a distinct move in the author's voice. It is the tolerance perspective that is very much the focus. Homosexuality is said to be something that we should accept, assuming that the classroom is a collective heterosexual entity. Teachers and

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students tend to state the same kind of things: We have to accept homosexuals because they are just like *us* and they are normal people.

CM: It is a liberal rhetoric.

AR: Definitely. They teach tolerance, but at the same time this method for teaching sexuality is a way of reproducing heterosexuality as the norm, and it is also a way of reproducing the hetero-assumed students as a group that is allowed to draw the line of what is acceptable and to outline what sort of rights they have. Homosexuality is always presented as something that is okay, if it is real, but you shouldn't try it. It is like saying: If you think you might be attracted to one of your same sex friends, wait and see; it might pass off. If you are really sure you are homosexual, then it is fine. You should come out and tell your parents and your friends. That is the implicit message. At the same time, the teachers and the books emphasize how difficult life is for many gays and lesbians in Norway and the difficulties they will presumably face. I think there is a good intention behind these statements. They intend to acknowledge the difficulties and homo-negativism that exist in Norwegian society. It is like saying: You will feel lonely and your parents might not like it. It will be difficult for you out there. And at the same time, they are saying: It is fully okay in Norwegian society today, it is not a problem; but in Iran, on the contrary, they have death penalties.

CM: Some of the other people I have interviewed have been mentioning an overarching narrative of tragedy when it comes to describing the homosexual experience in Norway, and it seems like this is a little bit the way that it is also presented in schools?

AR: This tragedy story is definitely alive in schools. I have also heard students saying: If I discovered I was gay, I would commit suicide. That sort of discourse is well known. But I think textbooks and teachers would probably try and avoid that dramatic end, because they probably see how bad it is for the students.

I think their intention is really to acknowledge problems, but the effect is that homosexuality is presented as something problematic, and you should really avoid it and pray to God you will never be there. It is not attractive at all. It is not presented as something that you might like or something you should try out and that might bring you a good life. None of the good stories of queer lives are made visible.

CM: Let me ask you a two-part question: When was this way of teaching revised? And could you go back in time, maybe 10 or 20 years, to outline how does this has changed over time?

AR: The first time homosexuality was mentioned in the Norwegian curriculum was in 1974. This is basically the first curriculum that is comparable with today's curriculum. The ones from 1939 and 1960 hardly dealt with sexuality at all. All that you were supposed to learn about was how babies are made, but nothing about sexuality. It is even explicitly said that it is not sexual education; it is only about how babies are made. In 1974 we had the first curriculum that dealt with gender equality. And the part on gender equality is actually more political and even better than today's, because it was influenced by feminism. It was a really good chapter on gender equality and why it was important to promote it among students. Today, gender equality is seen as something we already have, so we don't really have to bother talking about it anymore. This

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is something I find problematic. In 1974, homosexuality was sort of put in parentheses as one of the sexual practices different from the norm that should also be mentioned. Within those parentheses you had exhibitionism and homosexuality. It was really stigmatizing, but it was still supposed to be mentioned.

CM: But it was not amply expanded? It was just in parentheses?

AR: Yes, but I have not looked in the books, so I don't know what textbooks at the time actually did. This is what the curriculum stated. Sex between men was legalized in Norway in 1972, and this curriculum was from 1974. I think it was because of this new law that it was implemented in the curriculum. The next curriculum was in 1987, and that was the first time homosexuality was mentioned alongside falling in love. It was kind of ambivalent and some subjects were really marginalized. Heterosexuality was definitely the norm yet in one little section homosexuality was mentioned when teaching about falling in love. Heterosexuality and homosexuality were both linked to the concept of love. From being something different from the norm in 1974, it went to something that could actually be seen in relation to love.

CM: To your avail, what prompted that change?

AR: I think it reflected the changes in society. But in the Norwegian curriculum the different subjects have slightly different profiles, because different groups usually write them. The group writing the curriculum for religion, for example, seems to be more conservative than the one writing the goals for social science. And this theme pertains to social science. You would not find the link between homosexuality and falling in love in the text on religion. Even the current curriculum is quite conservative in religion and more progressive, or liberal, in the social sciences. This shift is probably due to the fact that left-wing progressive teachers or educators wrote this subject. Then we have the 1997 curriculum. At that time homosexuality was a mainstream issue, because we had achieved the partnership act in 1993. Thus, in 1997, when talking about marriage, you also had to mention homosexual partnerships. Although in textbooks, teaching and society heteronormativity prevailed, the curriculum tried to establish an equality. But at least, homosexuality is not explicitly discriminated anymore, depending on how you see it. I would say it is still discriminating in the way that they change from *we* to *they* in the textbooks, but still tolerance was the norm. I saw some students trying to oppose this homotolerance, and they would be told to just shut up.

CM: What do you mean? How was it?

AR: Boys in general, but mostly students from ethnic minorities. I think that when they voice homonegativism, they are not necessarily saying: I am hostile to homosexuals. It might be a question of opposing the normative Norwegianness in school, because homo-tolerance is an equivalent to being a good Norwegian, and that is what you are supposed to be like if you want to become a Norwegian. So if they want to oppose this normative Norwegianness, homonegativism seems to be a simple way of doing it.

CM: Do you think that it is about that, or it is an inherent rejection to homosexuality?

AR: It is probably both, but I find it quite striking that it seems to be the male students being marginalized at school that voice this homonegativism, boys belonging to ethnic minorities... It is

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the noisy boy in the back corner, the one who usually disturbs the class. I think it is important to emphasize that, because otherwise one might say it is the Muslim boys or the Muslim students that are the problem. I even heard teachers saying: "I don't know how I can teach about homosexuality, because the boys in the class are so immature and they can't take it. They are so negative about it that they will just disrupt the whole lecture, so maybe I should just drop the subject completely." And then one teacher told me: "I found a way, because this specific guy was absent one day and I could do that subject when he wasn't there." It is definitely seen, by some teachers and students, as a problem: "How can we have a good respectful discussion and conversation about the subject if those few boys can't handle the subject? They just shout out, and are negative about it." That is one part of the problem, but if you look closer, you see that it is not necessarily because they are Muslim. I have heard some teachers telling the students: "That is the way they feel about it in his culture, so we have to understand where he is coming from."

CM: What is the debate around this issue? It seems to be a very tricky subject.

AR: I think homosexuality is definitely presented as something you approve. All the students should conclude: I have nothing against homosexuals. I have heard students saying: "In our group, we have agreed, we have nothing against homosexuals." That is the conclusion from group discussions about it. It is presented as something you approve, but implicitly you could also be against it.

CM: Is it not problematized? It seems easy to teach something consensually, like we should all support homosexuality. But is there some critical way of approaching this subject? Is there discussion of a more incisively critical approach?

AR: You might find some teachers that are critical of the new marriage act. They would prefer separate laws for same sex partnership and heterosexual marriage. And you will also find teachers saying: "I think they should have all the rights, they should not be discriminated, but I don't know if they should also have the right to adopt children." So children are seen as a tricky issue. But the main problem is how homosexuality is still the main focus of discussion. Heterosexuality doesn't seem to be a subject at all; it is not seen as something you can talk about, something you can discuss. This whole idea of Norway being already gender equal is partly possible because sexuality and gender are not seen as being linked together in school. It is when you link gender and sexuality together when you definitely see the lack of gender equality in Norway.

One out of ten girls, according to statistics from the last year, has been raped or has experienced rape attempts by the age of 19. This is happening mostly in high school, and it happens with their boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, male friends, and at private parties or when they go away for the weekend. I think heterosexual harassment and sexual violence are a big problem, but that is not seen as a gender issue. Somehow, it is not at all linked together.

CM: How is it discussed?

AR: Mostly by saying to the boys that they shouldn't do it and that they should respect the girl when she says no. And the girls are told to say no. It is not seen as a result of the concept of

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heterosexuality, how boys and girls are supposed to relate within the norms of heterosexuality. I think that is an important reason why this idea of Norwegian gender equality can survive, because it is not linked to problems of young people and sexuality.

CM: Have you had the possibility of observing the way that the reproducing of heteronormativity through the curriculum and education reflects itself in the gay and lesbian community, and also in the trans community? How does this affect the way that LGBTQ students are living their lives in school? Are there issues of bullying or hate crimes?

AR: As you have probably heard already, *gay* and *homo* are the most used bullying words now in Norway. That is definitely seen as a problem among teachers. But then again, I think they are just saying it is not allowed to use those words, so they are not necessarily investigating the effects of using them. I have seen that most boys that are called *gay*, or bullied for being considered *homos*, aren't necessarily gay. They just perform a different form of masculinity. They might be boys that play an instrument, do their homework, don't interrupt their teachers, or avoid fights. I have read some British studies about that subject, and they are quite clear about how gayness represents a different kind of non-normative masculinity, so it is not really about sexuality. It is about the way gender is performed. The word *homo* is not necessarily telling some boys that they shouldn't be gay. It is telling all of them that they should not be feminine; they should not like classical music, etc. They should not be anything that is seen as feminine.

CM: It is the patriarchal way.

AR: Yes. It is the way of drawing lines for acceptable ways of performing masculinity for all boys. It is the same with the words *whore* and *hooker*, used to bully girls. They don't necessarily affect girls that have many sexual partners. It tells *all* girls what they should not be doing and how they should not behave to qualify as attractive heterosexual girls.

CM: How is transgenderism taught, if at all?

AR: I don't think it is taught in schools. I think in some books have these little key definitions in a little column on the side, where you might have heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality and transsexuality. But bisexuality is not mentioned either. It is only mentioned as a definition, nothing that could be taken into account when you talk about sexuality in general. The whole concept of sexuality is definitely binary, and it also seems to be something you are born with. It is not socially constructed; it is not something that changes throughout life. It is something given, that is the way you are. This relates to the way they talk about homosexuality: If you find out that that is what you are, then it is okay; but if you aren't, then you shouldn't try it.

Transsexualism has not been really on the agenda at all. My colleague and I are writing about this in our book and we are stating that gender seems to be normative: You are supposed to make sure you are read as either male or female, from an early age, children are taught to read people as male or female, and they can get confused if they come across a person who doesn't fit strictly into that binary category. They might say things such as: "You have short hair, you can't be a woman... but why do you have breasts then?" And then, if I tell them something like: "But you have a green shirt on, so you can't be a woman, it doesn't make sense to them." Then they start making up weird explanations about why they can't read me correctly. We are writing about how this confusion might lead to violence. If you are confused, if you can't really find out

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how to read people, then you might become aggressive and even use violence. We are actually putting quite a lot of focus on that in this book. The goal is to have this book used in teachers' education in Norway.

I think the whole concept of sexuality, the way it is taught in school and the way it is presented to the Norwegian public, is very simple. You are either heterosexual or homosexual. Bisexuality doesn't exist. Furthermore, you should look like a normal man or a normal woman, since the only sort of problem you have is that you are sexually attracted to your own sex. It is all really clean and simple, and this way it can be handled and can be taken into school.

As soon as you are trying to deal with trans questions, a much wider or more complex picture on gender and sexuality opens up. The best way of getting across the tolerance message is to make it all clean-cut, easy and nice, since the whole base of the concept of tolerance is that you are born that way. It is not something you are allowed to want to try out or to live. Then, it would not be tolerable any more.