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An Interview with Tone Hellesund

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Tone's office at the Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies, University of Bergen

Tone Hellesund: My name is Tone Hellesund. I work at the Rokkan Centre for Social Studies, which is a research institute in Bergen composed of about fifty researchers from the social sciences and humanities. I have a PhD in cultural anthropology. I am interested in different kinds of themes revolving around gender and sexuality, as well as around inclusion and exclusion, normalcy and difference, etc.

Carlos Motta: What is the emphasis of your work?

TH: My first big research project was about spinsters in Norway during the period from 1870 to 1940. I looked at the construction of the spinster as a category, and at the construction of the spinster as “queer/odd” from a perspective of gender and sexuality. From the spinsters I moved on to narratives about young homosexuals in contemporary Norway.

CM: What is a spinster?

TH: Single women during the period from 1870 to 1940 were perceived as a social problem: What to do about these single women? Why didn't they get married? What should society do about them? How would they change society? At this time, women started to demand political citizenship, the right to education and the right to participate in society. Many movements were initiated partly by the emergence of this group of single women, who additionally were promoting the first wave of feminism; many of them were very active in the feminist organizations of the 1880s and the 1890s. Some of the reforms in regard to legislation, education, etc., came as an effect of the needs of these single women. Everyone saw that they needed to be able to support themselves, and this process set a movement in motion and several changes in the field of gender.

I have been studying the culture of these single women, what I call the “spinster culture,” which couldn't be seen an underground movement, because they were middle class women that saw themselves as the core of civilization and respectability; yet they were seen as threat to society. They developed their own culture, which was very much in conflict with the traditional gender system and the traditional relationship between men and women at the time.

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I also studied the romantic friendships and the homosexual relationships between women during that era. I claim that during the 1920s and the 1930s, Norway was *heterosexualized*; that is when heterosexuality as an ideology really emerged in Norway. I also claim that the spinsters were marginalized in a new way during the 1920s and 1930s, when sexual relationships between men and women were highlighted in the public and popular cultures.

CM: How was the process of *de-heterosexualization*? If it begins in the 1920s, how does it develop historically in Norway, a country that is perhaps one of the most progressive in the world in this regard? How does this *queering* take place?

TH: From the perspective of the single women, I would claim that in the Victorian era, in the 1870s and 1890s, not getting married was a problem. Women were supposed to get married and have children, and the spinsters did neither. They were definitely a problem for the established gender structure. At the same time, the Victorian culture was a society with separate spheres for men and women, a strong emphasis on gender differences and how women had certain characteristics and men others, and it was acceptable for men and women to live separate lives. In that gender framing, it was possible to develop a woman's culture, where men were excluded, and women; femininity and feminine values got great attention. Therefore, these spinsters could live in a culture where they worked amongst other women. They were doctors, nurses or teachers, and they spent their whole careers with other women doing good for society. During their spare time, they would participate in women choirs, women missionary organizations or feminist organizations and all other kinds of women only activities. It was possible to develop this women only sphere, where many spinsters had the possibility of creating lives full of dignity.

Furthermore, since they saw themselves as representing the height of civilization and they were also in some ways perceived as such by society, they were representing what everyone in society saw as good values. They also could raise their voices and have a legitimate place in the public sphere. I would also claim that at this time, from 1880 to the first World War, the gender systems were kind of in flux, they were fluid, and there was a lot of debate, there were many different voices trying to define what the new gender system should be and what new gender roles should be about. The group of spinsters was one of these voices during this period trying to mold a new society and a new gender system. But after the First World War, a new belief in psychology appeared. Popular Freudianism was big in Norway, as well as the theories of Wilhelm Reich, a German psychologist who lived in Oslo, who strongly believed in the relationship between men and women and how sexual practices between the two sexes were really the core of progress and a way to achieve true liberation. Popular culture was much more frivolous and more focused on sexual relations between men and women. Accordingly, the Victorian era's ideals of focusing on separate spheres were seen as old fashioned and not as a progress in civilization. Since the spinsters that I have studied belonged to the upper and middle classes, the growth of the socialist feminist movement also set different agendas from those the old bourgeois women's movement had focused on.

CM: What are these new agendas that the socialist feminist movement focused on?

TH: The socialist women focused more on maternity, motherhood, contraception and abortion; issues that for the spinsters had been absolutely taboo. The spinsters were strongly opposed to contraception, abortion and to education on sexual matters. Many of them argued that to give

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women contraception and the right to abortion would only enhance men's possibilities of abusing and taking advantage of them.

CM: From the perspective of your research, do you see the spinsters as kind of forerunners of the queer movement, or is that not a relevant analogy?

TH: I don't see them as forerunners of the queer movement, but I see them as queer, in many ways. I think it is interesting to look at the culture of the spinsters, the social discourse about spinsters and the categorization around them as a kind of queer space. I would claim that spinsters were seen as queer, not because they were not mothers or wives, but because they wanted to go into the public sphere and to break the gender boundaries between the private and the public. They wanted to have access to public life, to be able to take jobs and to be in politics; they wanted to have their own economy. In the Norwegian context, this is the queerest characteristic of the spinsters: They really wanted to break some fundamental gender roles and consequently they were seen as a threat to the established gender order. This is happening during the first phase of the spinster society.

In the second phase, their queerness was much more linked to explicit sexuality or to the lack of sexuality. Since no *decent* woman in the Victorian era was supposed to have sexuality, the spinsters had not been queer in that regard; but in the 1920s and 1930s, female sexuality was suddenly discovered and all women were supposed to have and enjoy their sexuality. At this point, frigidity and asexuality also became a topic, a very problematic topic. You could say that the spinsters became queer because they didn't have sex or didn't take part in sexual activities, and also because they started to be perceived as potentially homosexual. Thus, the romantic spinster friendships of the earlier phase that were not seen as problematic in a sexual way became highly problematic in the 1920s and 1930s. Suddenly, all female relationships were seen as suspicious, they were seen in a new sexual light.

CM: Is there a parallel narrative for men around the time? Could you speak of "male spinsters"? Was a group of men behaving similarly?

TH: I don't really think there was a male group behaving in the same way because so much of this was linked to the changes in women's roles in that era, and men's roles were not changing as much. Male friendships had been seen as suspicious even earlier on; male sexuality was present as a possibility between friends earlier than it was between women. When it comes to homosexuality, you see more examples of explicit male homosexuality and of men identifying with homosexuality. Men became homosexuals before women did in Norwegian history. Nonetheless, we don't have a lot of sources on this, because not many people have written about it in their diaries, and there are not many court cases from the era. I am sure more research will be done on this time period, and then we will have more knowledge on how these things really were.

CM: But both male homosexuality and the second phase of the spinsters, with their heightened sense of sexuality, were perceived as a threat to society?

TH: Yes, absolutely.

CM: How did the perception of homosexuality change in Norway?

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TH: The Second World War marks two different periods in Norwegian history. The modern homosexual movement started around 1950 in Norway, and I don't know if you can see any traces of that movement back in history. Probably you see more links between the modern homosexual movement and other homosexual movements starting in the same time period in other Western countries. You can see parallels between what happened in Norway and in the US, or in other Nordic countries, especially in Denmark, which was the leading Nordic country in this field.

Both women and men were involved in the start of this new organization in 1950 and they were a part of this homophile movement that started in the US. As you know, *homofil* became *the* word we use for homosexuals in the Norwegian language. Norway is one of the few countries in the world that continues to use this term that was introduced in the 1950s; a term that was supposed to sound better than *homosexual* and to take the focus away from sexuality from the concept of homosexuality. *Fil* means love. You were supposed to focus on love. The aim was, of course, to make the concept more respectable and likeable. The *homofil* movement in Norway focused very much on respectability and discretion. They worked partly in secrecy for many years, trying to reach out to politicians and psychiatrists and also doing lobby work.

CM: How was the *homofil* movement based on respectability and family values?

TH: In the first few decades respectability was very important. They were trying to change society's views on homosexuality. Male homosexuality was illegal in Norway until 1972, and the homosexual movement started to work on decriminalizing it. To do that, they needed to clean the category of homosexuality and make it feel less criminal, less deviant or pathological, to try to get sympathy from the public. They didn't make any fuss, didn't cross any gender boundaries or were not explicitly sexual. The focus was very much on the individual's right to love whomever he/she wanted and to live peaceful and quiet lives. That was the official policy.

With the 1970s came a new radicalization of all social movements in Norway, including the homosexual one. The grand old lady of the homosexual movement in Norway, Kim Friele, took over the leadership of the organization in the late 1960s, and she became a driving force for several decades. She was the first one to publicly give homosexuality a face and a name. She came from a very respectable bourgeois family in Bergen, so she kind of had the right class background and the right language. She did a great job for the organization for many years. She continued reaching out to individual politicians, trying to lobby, but also promoted homosexuality in the media and gave homosexuality a positive image to the public.

CM: Is the term equality important already then? Is it a word that is foundational to the movement in Norway?

TH: Yes, I think equality was an important word. It is interesting to me that the movement took a stand against marriage in the early 1970s. They underlined that they wanted individuals to have rights and equality, not couples. They basically wanted to abolish couple's rights, like marriage, and to fight for the individual's right to secure a safe place in society. As we know, this agenda has changed dramatically, since the focus on couples and marriage has become the main agenda of the later homosexual movement. But again, in the early 1970s, couples and marriage were definitely not on the agenda, probably because at that time that was too radical a vision. It was not possible to imagine that homosexuals would ever gain the right to marry.

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In the 1970s it was much more focused on new life forms, new ways of living together, abolishing marriage, living in communes and having polyamorous relationships. These kinds of things were on the agenda to a larger extent in the 1970s than in the 1980s and 1990s.

CM: What is the relationship between the development of the welfare State and the movement?

TH: I think there is a very strong link between the development of the welfare State and the gay movement, and certainly between the ideals of the welfare State and the inclusion of homosexuals as citizens, giving them the same rights everyone else. The *Labor Party*, the most important political party in Norway since the World War II, has become one of the main proponents of homosexual rights. Nonetheless, within the *Labor Party* and definitely within the workers' unions, which have been strongly linked to this party, there was also strong opposition to putting homosexuality on the agenda; but in the last decade, at least, the *Labor Party* has been the main proponent of homosexual rights. The *Socialist Party (SV)* has also always raised the agenda for homosexuals. The proponents of the welfare State have come to see homosexuality as a sign of civilization and modernity.

CM: What does the welfare State, as a social platform, offer for the development of the sexual movement?

TH: The inclusion of as many citizens as possible into the productive welfare State is a goal for most political groups. I think many of the legislative reforms in Norway have not been met with great opposition. Many of the reforms have come when the public was ready for these reforms. The wheel of the welfare State has worked its way toward homosexual rights. From 1990 onwards the gay and lesbian movement has been working closely and has shared the agenda of the political establishment: Including homosexuals in all levels of society and making them equal citizens. I also think that homosexuals, and homosexual rights, have become an important symbol for the modern welfare State, a symbol of progress and modernity. In Norway, one of the leading nations in the world in matters of gender and sexuality, these themes have become a part of the nationalist discourse: "Norway is a very modern, progressive, inclusive and tolerant State."

CM: Could you give me an idea of the different phases of the situation of homosexuals in Norway from the time period of the spinsters, through the wars, to the modern movement? How have things evolved? Norway is considered, as you say, to be the most progressive country in these matters, but I would like to understand how this "rainbow" has developed.

TH: I wouldn't know where to start drawing that rainbow. The story of the modern homosexual movement starts in 1950. But, of course, you could start drawing the rainbow from the time period of the romantic friendships of *my* spinsters, or also from the sexual underground culture of male homosexuals. But if I let it start in the 1950s, then the first two decades were focused on the decriminalization homosexuality. That was the first important victory.

Then we had a revolution in regards to the visibility of homosexuality. Kim Friele should be accorded the honors for that visibility. While the concept of homosexuality was not even mentioned in respectable newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s, suddenly in the 1970s we started having public debates about homosexuality, we saw homosexual faces on TV or we heard them on the radio; we started having demonstrations, homosexual sections in the First of

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May parades, etc. The visibility of homosexuality in public life increased immensely. While the homosexuals of the 1950s and 1960s had relied very much on secrecy and on keeping a low profile, the new agenda of the 1970s was to be out and proud, to make yourself visible and to tell everyone that you were a homosexual.

CM: Something that is part of an international trend...

TH: Absolutely. The modern homosexual movement in Norway is definitely part of an international lesbian and gay movement, so you can see the same development in the Norwegian movement as in many other Western countries. Furthermore, lesbians and gays traveled a lot: they bought books in the US, traveled to the UK and to Copenhagen, went out to bars; they had lovers from different countries, etc. What maybe is specific to Norway or Scandinavia, and it probably has something to do with the size of the country, is that it has been possible to establish very strong contacts in the political establishment and to use lobbying as one of the main channels for the work.

After this period of focusing on visibility and gaining individual rights and anti-discrimination laws, the work for partnership or marriage rights started in the late 1980s. That has basically been the focus since then, the right to marry. You can see that in many different ways. You could see it as a reflection of the political climate of these decades: To focus on family values and respectability; on homosexuals being as good, respectable and family oriented citizens has been a very strategic and wise way of framing the cause.

What has been interesting is that the critique of the nuclear family and marriage, those kinds of debates that were present in the 1970s disappeared from the public agenda in the 1990s and the 2000s. There have been very few opposing voices in the public. Although many of us have been critical of the family and the respectability orientation of the Norwegian movement, many of us still agree that to gain marriage rights has been an important step in the achievement of citizenship rights. Achieving the gender equal marriage in 2009 was kind of the final victory in regard to gaining full citizenship rights as queers in Norway. Despite the fact that many of us want to abolish marriage, we can still see that the right to marry has been an important step.

CM: You speak of a final step, but what are the challenges faced by the queer community today? If the legislation is so advanced and progressive, is there something cultural that is not the same way? Is there homophobia in families? This could also lead us into your recent research on suicide.

TH: Although homosexuality is now equal according to the Norwegian legislation and anti-gay discrimination bills have also protected it, it is still seen culturally as something inferior to heterosexuality. "The good life" in Norway, what all parents want for their children, the best life you can get is still very much a heterosexual life. Even though as a homosexual, you can still have "the good life" by having children, getting married and living in harmony as a nuclear family, I think most Norwegians see heterosexuality as the ideal life.

In the project I have been doing on homosexuality and suicide narratives, I have interviewed young people who have tried to commit suicide because of their homosexuality, and they tell stories about being marginalized. From a very young age they recognized that homosexuality was seen as something, not only different from the lives their parents, families, friends and

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communities lived, but as something fundamentally different; something that really belonged to a different reality or universe; something that went on in a different place, between different people, and definitely not here in *our* family, at *our* school or in *our* village.

The stories I have heard are told by young people between the ages of 14 and 18 that live in very heterosexual environments, where they hear very few positive stories about homosexuality, yet they constantly hear that “the good life” is supposed to be heterosexual. These stories also speak of how if they were to *become* homosexuals, they would have to leave aside the life they had lived until then and become different persons in the eyes of their families, friends and maybe even in their own eyes.

Homosexuality is still seen as the truth about a human being. In Norwegian, we use the word *legning*; we speak of *homofil legning*, a homosexual inclination, which I see as a very essentialist framing of sexuality. That is a term that is very much used in the public debate and in every day conversations amongst general people. It is assumed that if you are a homosexual, you have this inborn inclination; your core is that you were born a homosexual, and there is nothing you can do about it. This is a very strong story in the Norwegian context.

In order to gain citizenship rights, to give homosexuals more space and to give us the right to live as ordinary citizens, there has been a discourse focusing on homosexuality as an essence, thus promoting an essentialist agenda. There has also been a strong focus on the *suffering* of homosexuals. The suicide narrative is very strong in Norway, particularly since a report was published in 1999 that showed a higher occurrence of suicide attempts among young homosexuals than heterosexuals. Those statistics have been used heavily by the homosexual organization to claim rights. On the one hand, the focus on inborn identities, the essentialist understanding of homosexuality as a fundamental difference, the focus on suffering and the cry for tolerance, have been the roots that have led to obtaining citizenship rights. On the other hand, I think it is a very problematic discourse. Even today, when we have citizenship rights, that narrative is holding homosexuals down as something fundamentally different, as something that should be tolerated and felt sorry for.

CM: Does that speak of a split between the advancement of legislation and the promotion of and educational agenda in schools and culture?

TH: Yes, it is partly about education in children's, teacher's and nursing schools, and on higher levels of education. But it is also a development that has been quite rapid. Cultural norms about homosexuality have changed dramatically, they have not changed completely, but still there is a lot more acceptance of homosexuality today than 30 or 40 years ago. It is definitely much easier to live all kinds of homosexual lives in Norway now than before. It is a lot less traumatic for many young people to tell their parents about their homosexuality. Things have definitely changed, but the norm is still heterosexuality, and heteronormativity is still the frame of reference for the Norwegian culture.

CM: Are you critical of the suffering narrative that has been created for homosexuals or you consider it to be a foundational narrative yourself?

TH: I am critical of the suffering narrative; I think it is very problematic. But I understand why it has been used strategically by the homosexual organizations.

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CM: Why?

TH: Research shows that the arguments that most easily convince the politicians in Parliament, for instance, are the narratives of suffering and the inborn disposition. I think that has definitely been the only way of convincing politicians to let homosexuals have rights. I think it has been a very successful and, probably, also necessary strategy to use.

CM: Are you critical of this strategy?

TH: I am critical of it because I think that by continuing to use this suffering narrative you also reproduce homosexuality as second rate and as something inferior to heterosexuality. Homosexuals are seen as people that should be pitied, and tolerated, and not as equal citizens.

An organization called *Fritt Ord*, that gives a prize every year to someone who has been brave in a public debate, gave their 2008 prize to a conservative philosopher, Nina Karin Monsen, who has been aggressively attacking homosexual rights and has been one of the strongest opponents against the gender-neutral marriage law. I think the public debate around this prize has been really interesting, but scary as well. Nina Karin Monsen got a lot of support from people that you would not expect would support such an anti-homosexual agenda, and the scary part was that many straight journalists and a few academics who took part in this debate did not recognize her agenda as anti-homosexual. It was obvious that many of them had thought that they were really tired of all this talk about homosexuality, and that they felt that homosexuals had far too many rights and that it was time to focus on the heterosexuals instead. It was frightening to see how many of those voices suddenly popped up when Monsen, in her lunatic way, expressed some of her views. It became obvious that it is not politically correct to speak up against homosexual rights; but suddenly, when this debate gave an outlet, it was clear that many people had things to say, and that they were really tired of homosexuals taking up so much space in the public agenda. 2008 was kind of a backlash year for many of us.

CM: Returning to your research on suicide, is it true that homosexuals commit more suicides than others, and in what numbers? What leads to these suicides? Is it family pressure or a feeling of isolation in school or at work?

TH: Research implies that more young homosexuals commit suicide attempts than heterosexuals. I don't know exactly how much larger the percentage is, and I don't really think we can tell from the research, but there is an overrepresentation.

In the stories I included in my book, the feeling of isolation, like you said, and the feeling of being excluded from the environment you grew up in, and still wanted to be a part of, are named as some of the reasons why they felt they would rather die than live their lives as homosexuals.

The suicide narrative is strong in Norway and when that is *the* narrative about homosexuality that young people hear, they can also put their own suffering, and their own struggle into it, and connect to it in a way that could be potentially dangerous. All the people I have interviewed want to be normal, and want to have normal lives, and for them homosexuality was not something that could be integrated or combined with a normal life. The feeling of having to be someone different, of living a different life and being someone extraordinary, when all they want to be is ordinary people, is really strong in the stories I heard. I am sure that there are a lot of other

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stories about homosexuality and suicide too, but the ones I heard were the classic homosexual script, which is very easy to combine with the suicide script.

The story of the modern homosexuality is also a story about suicide. And these two stories have been so closely linked for so long, that it is very easy to put your own suffering and struggles into that script.

CM: What do you think is the challenge for this youth? How can one challenge the idea of what is ordinary versus extraordinary, or what is normal versus different in society?

TH: In the Norwegian context we need a variety of homosexual scripts and different narratives about homosexuality. We need to get rid of this “inborn-disposition” or “homosexuality-as-not-a-choice” story as the *only* story. Of course there will be many individuals that feel that that story is what best represents them, but we need to hear other stories as well, stories that don't focus exclusively on tragedy and suffering. We need to stop begging for acceptance and tolerance!

CM: What is the alternative?

TH: The alternative is to claim equality. We should live our lives the way we want to, and who cares if we are respectable or family oriented or whatever, we still have the right to be full citizens.