

The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State

Comparative Insights into
a Transformed Relationship



EDITED BY
MANON TREMBLAY, DAVID PATERNOTTE
AND CAROL JOHNSON

Chapter 7

The Netherlands: Depoliticization of Homosexuality and Homosexualization of Politics

Gert Hekma and Jan Willem Duyvendak

This chapter on the gay and lesbian movement¹ in the Netherlands examines how government policies and strategies, changing social attitudes towards homosexuality, and other cultural, religious, social, and economic factors have affected homosexual activism since the sexual revolution (for Dutch gay history see Hekma 2004a and 2005, Oosterhuis 1999). It shows an interesting parallel development. On the one hand, homosexual activism has de-radicalized under the influence of a responsive, consensual political system. On the other hand, gender and homo/sexual politics have become increasingly central to Dutch politics and national identity. These two developments are deeply intertwined: de-queering Dutch homosexuality was the precondition for the centre stage position of 'homophilia' in the national self-image (Hekma 2004c, Mepschen et al. 2010).

In the realm of sexual politics, the Netherlands is deemed to be one of the most liberal countries in the world. A staunchly religious society with conservative sexual morals in the 1950s, two decades later the Dutch majority had embraced secular, liberal positions on divorce, pornography, prostitution, homosexuality, contraception, and teenage sexuality. This sea-change in the political and cultural climate was followed by legislative reform. Divorce was made easier, pornography and prostitution were decriminalized, and contraception was made widely available. The criminal law – which had enshrined in article 248bis different ages of consent for homosexual and heterosexual sex (21 and 16 years respectively) – was changed in 1971, when the age of consent was set for both at 16. Contraceptives were made available to all women as part of the general

1 In the remainder of the chapter, we will use 'gay' for 'gay and lesbian'. While we realize this does not sufficiently recognize the lesbian contribution, gay politics have often concentrated on male homosexuals and, perhaps rather amazingly, many young Dutch lesbians prefer the label 'gay' to an explicit one such as 'lesbian' that is used by only 13 percent of them (Keuzenkamp 2010: 137–38). They resist being clearly identified as such, differentiating themselves from an older generation that, they assume, did look for a lesbian identity, community and visibility, while at the same time trying not to distance them too much from 'normal', straight feminine females (Fobear 2010; Heugten 2010).

provision of medical care. These broader changes in sexual culture demonstrate that the gay movement was not the main agent behind this social transformation. Furthermore, Amsterdam has been home to a vibrant gay culture since the 1950s. Twenty years later, and still by the end of the century, it was a 'gay capital'. Gays and lesbians have been allowed to serve in the Dutch army since 1973. The national homosexual rights movement, the COC, received royal approval that same year, meaning its directors were no longer personally responsible in case of bankruptcy. Following sixteen years of debate, an Equal Rights Law for gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference was enacted in 1993. Registered partnerships were legalized in 1997 for both same-sex and other-sex couples. In 2001, the Netherlands became the first country in the world to open marriage to same-sex partners. While many saw this as the endpoint for gay emancipation, legal equality did not necessarily mean social equality, let alone respect for sexual difference. Over the years of struggle for emancipation and liberation, the movement and its participants were highly influenced by the – overall – rather supportive and responsive reactions by Dutch politics. From a movement that aimed for radical change in gender and sexual relations in the seventies, it has transformed into a movement for acceptance of homosexuality and legal equality. This 'normalization' of homosexuality did, in turn, influence Dutch politics. It facilitated the crucial positioning of (homo)sexuality in the debate on social integration of new (Muslim) immigrants: 'liberated' homosexuals became the embodiment of Dutch modernity and the opposite of 'backward' Muslim migrants.

Prelude to a Movement

Why these momentous, liberalizing changes took place in the Netherlands in the sixties and seventies is still not entirely clear. Below we will review some of the explanations that have commonly been proposed. The liberal sexual culture of the Dutch, many argue, is largely due to the country's political culture. Inherited from the French in the early nineteenth century, it is based on the separation of church and state, where sexual affairs are seen as the private business of citizens and beyond the purview of state regulation. While the Christian parties introduced stricter laws regarding sex when they came to power in the early twentieth century, they did not touch the liberal foundations of the Dutch legal system. Nor did they forbid sexual practices in the private realm, as was done in Germany and Britain. But since this is true for some other countries (Adam, Duyvendak, and Krouwel 1999), more reasons are needed to explain Dutch exceptionalism; particularly the rapid change from a conservative country until the mid-1960s into a frontrunner in sexual emancipation thereafter.

Commentators have traced the sexual revolution of the 1960s to the sudden and radical transformation of Dutch social organization; the so called 'de-pillarization' of society. Until the 1960s, all Dutch citizens were part of a distinct community or 'pillar' – Roman Catholic, Protestant, Labor or Liberal. The pillars

