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## 4. Sex and the city

Room for sexual citizenship

*Gert Hekma*

Sex is everywhere and nowhere. Statistics show that masturbation and coital sex vie for a first place in terms of which is most prevalent. When it comes to cities, however, the media give the impression that sex work and homosexual intercourse are most prevalent and that non-commercial heterosexual and masturbation seldom occur. 'Ordinary' heterosexuality remains invisible precisely because it sets the standard, also in cities. It is still seen as natural behaviour and a private matter, and this is the most important reason that the other forms appear more in public as 'deviations' and are discriminated against. Because sex is considered private and natural, politics rarely has anything clear to say about it.

Urban citizenship has many faces: it is about culture, sports, economics, politics, gender and also sexuality. The facts refute the idea that eroticism is not a public matter. Sexuality is in many ways a matter of citizenship – the most important ways in which this is the case are briefly summarised in the first part of this essay. The second part of this article is about the consequences that sexual citizenship has for cities and the policy of 'city branding', such as presenting the city as gay-friendly in order to attract creative companies and 'pink money'.

### Public life

To begin with, there are official institutions that make or break sexual citizenship. Among such institutions are the sex laws which until the end of the 19th century were few and included legal articles on rape, indecent exposure and the promotion of

debauchery of minors (then 21 years old was the age threshold). In 1886, the Dutch law was beefed up with an age limit of 16 years and an article against pornography; in 1911, the age limit for homosexual contacts was raised to 21 years and articles on prostitution, abortion and contraceptives were introduced. The sexual revolution led to the abolition or loosening of the sex laws from 1970 onwards, but since 1990 the focus throughout the world has once again been directed at strengthening legislation on such crimes as 'extreme' and digital pornography, sex between and with young people, sex work and bestiality. In addition to legislation, there are regulations at the level of municipalities and institutions – such as the ban in the past on the wearing of clothing of the other sex and the rules now in place in many institutions against intimacy between men and women or between adults and children. Institutions create their own rules for 'decent' behaviour that mainly have to do with what kind of eroticism is not allowed. Institutions sometimes intervene under the guise of 'decency' without there being clear norms. There are rarely positive ways to facilitate discussions on the sexual rights of citizens (such as disabled people's right to visit prostitutes); at most they are negative such as the discussions on erotic imagery. At one point, people proposed to abolish the sex laws given that there is no separate chapter in the penal code on families or households and that other crimes can be brought under ordinary crimes such as violence or abuse of power. Coercion is not very different in sex work than in the horticultural industry, and rape is essentially not very different than other types of violence.

One of the main institutions of sexuality is marriage, which for a long time was strictly heterosexual and was focused above all on regulating reproductive relations. In 2001, the institution of marriage was opened up to same-sex couples. Marital status has a number of consequences for offspring, housing, taxes, social security and so on that nowadays apply not only to married couples but also increasingly to registered partners and people living together. Marriage is about couples and not about relations in which more than two partners are involved. Although

monogamy is ingrained in our culture, there is no longer a ban on adultery. Nonetheless, for most people, sex, love and pairing belong together, even though decoupling may often be a good idea. But overstepping the social norm of monogamy is for most people simply unthinkable. This has all sorts of consequences regarding divorce, living and sleeping arrangements, child rearing, etc.

Courtship is another public institution with many faces. Sex is considered to be a private matter, and we are no longer familiar with public forms of sexual initiation. Methods of communicating about sexuality in a pleasant way have scarcely been developed – there is no *ars erotica* and no places to learn it. Lessons on sexuality hardly suffice because they are about biology and reproduction, the dangers of sex or opinions about sexual diversity, and not about seduction or erotic initiation, nor forms of erotic pleasure. Schools do not offer space for sexual lessons of life.

Traditional housing is almost entirely aimed at families with two parents and children (albeit less than before) and not at single people or broader relationships with more than two adults. The bedroom is the place to have sex. Urban development in suburbs is geared towards families that are increasingly engaged solely with themselves and less with other families, neighbours or other people in the vicinity. The idea is that schools or associations bring social cohesion through sports and games but steer clear of intimate relationships that may well be better suited for cohesion. Urban plans do not incorporate places for erotic and sexual encounters. The public spaces currently available in cities are either too primitive for such encounters (hangouts, red-light districts, quiet corners in parks) or too commercial (bars, festivals, internet); the prevailing gender or sexual norms in such spaces are moreover not the most pleasant, and openness and freedom of action are not always guaranteed. Lovers' lanes apparently need to come into being spontaneously: in the architecture of homes and cities, sexual citizenship remains an underrepresented aspect. Sexuality plays a role in many

institutions: in the police force and the judiciary, in health care, education, the media, factories and offices, in the hospitality industry and in relations between colleagues and with clients. How much sexual privacy do patients in hospitals get or prisoners in their cells? How intimate can relationships be at home, at school or at the office? How much gender and sexual diversity is possible? How much physical and psychological space does sexual citizenship get? Are skirts too short or pants too tight? Are there limits to the eroticisation of health care, sports or the school playground? Are certain advertisements, forms of art or pornographic images too explicit for women, children or religious believers? Are physical intimacies lawful, beneficial or actually detrimental? These are all questions to which institutions have given meagre answers at best and they have rarely thought about spatial and citizenship aspects.

### **Urban sexual potencies**

A city such as Amsterdam endeavours to be a gay capital but has become less so because the choices for homosexual city trips have increased and because search behaviour has moved from the street and the sauna to the smartphone. Amsterdam does not strive to be a sex capital in addition to being a gay capital, even though the city does have that reputation with its Red Light District as a major attraction. But the Dutch capital would rather shed this reputation than market it. And there is every reason for this, given the varied sexual morality of its inhabitants: homos, hipsters, whoremongers, headscarf bearers and all the other people who in their minds, hearts and actions have difficulty with enjoying or discovering erotic pleasure.

Promoting sex is good for the city itself: in the first place, intimate encounters could help to cultivate social cohesion, because all the differences that the city commends itself for stimulate desires that could bring people closer together but that now still tend to create divisions between them. In the second

place, it can stimulate tourism. In addition to the freedom to use drugs, eroticism can tempt tourists to visit Amsterdam. The city is less able to distinguish itself from other European cities with the other features it tends to promote itself for (such as monuments, museums or art), as tourists can just as easily go to Paris or Rome for this. Sex can offer a city such as Amsterdam a unique appeal.

The American urban studies theorist Richard Florida argues that sexual freedom is good for cities: it attracts members of a creative class and promotes economic opportunities. In this respect, the Netherlands and Amsterdam have an advantage over other countries and cities, since most Dutch people believe that they are sexually free and tolerant. Whether this opinion is consistent with reality is questionable as long as Dutch people remain convinced of heterosexual, monogamous norms and of how men and women should behave (men: sexually active, versus women: passive). There is much that needs to be done with the inhabitants themselves and at the level of institutions that are responsible for sexual matters. This would enable a city such as Amsterdam to get much more out of its sexual possibilities, not only economically (as Richard Florida puts forth) or in terms of city branding but by creating mental and physical space for erotic pleasure and intimate citizenship.

In 2007, a panel debate took place with Job Cohen, the then mayor of Amsterdam, about 'Sex in the City'. He spoke about sexuality mainly in terms of public order and policing. This kind of negative attitude is widespread: churches have drummed into their parishioners a dismissive attitude towards sex; sciences such as psychology, and politics with its regulation of brothels and sex, have not been silent on this issue; and in society, an atmosphere of secrecy or gossip prevails. Sexual education mainly deals with 'negative' matters such as unwanted pregnancies, disease, abuse, girls who must learn to say 'no' to importuning, and boys who must accept such rejections. The basic attitude towards sexuality can be more positive: rather than a scourge, sex should be a matter of pleasure.

As has happened with 'Pride' groups around LGBT+ themes (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender), institutions should devote more invigorating and serious attention to sexual issues or to eroticism at the workplace and in one's free time. This also holds true in the hospitality industry, in hospitals, prisons, businesses, shops, museums and the art world. I have demonstrated above how institutions play an important role in this. Their contribution is essential for the quality of urban sexual life. Gradually, the social sciences are beginning to discover that not only gender but also sex is a core theme in society. Politics can move away from its basic negative attitude of treating sex as if it was a question of public order and of forbidding and punishing. Political parties could add a broad section on sex to their political programmes. The government can play an initiating role, just as with LGBTs. Sexual citizenship makes erotic practices a political issue that deserves recognition across the board and not only in terms of city branding or gays.

Sex is more often heaven than hell (and usually nothing special). For a city such as Amsterdam, it is more a goldmine than a matter of public order. Tourists flock en masse to Amsterdam because of its sexual reputation. Due to the politics of discouragement of recent decades such as with its policy on prostitution, this flow of visitors is most likely steadily decreasing. This is regrettable not only due to the money that could have been earned but also because Amsterdam can disseminate a positive message about sex, as it does with the Canal Parade: one of pleasure and human rights. The city prides itself on its many nationalities; let it for once track how much sexual diversity there is – and not only the approved alphabet soup of LGBT or LGBTIQQ2SA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersexual, queer, questioning, two-spirited, asexual) but also for other sexual interests such as sex work, BDSM (bondage & discipline; dominance & submission; sadism & masochism), fetishism, pornophilia, public sex or the growing love for internet sex with Grindr and Tinder. To paraphrase the Marquis de Sade, eroticism deserves to be given a significant boost in order to

make a city such as Amsterdam a truly liberal, free and tolerant metropolis. The city can develop itself into a sexual sanctuary for residents, visitors and asylum seekers – into a capital not only for gay people but also for sexual democracy and sexual knowledge.

## The author

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