Article

Border Regimes: Homophobia and LGBT Place Making in Six Ordinary Cities in Europe

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Abstract: European nation states increasingly hail LGBT identities as part of modern values; LGBT recognitions have become a symbol of secular achievements. Discourses around gay rights and sexual diversity are increasingly pitted against presumably homophobic and intolerant ‘others’. An increased intolerant and repressive attitude towards migrants and racialised minorities is justified by their supposed threat to exactly these values. LGBT people are finding themselves positioned as ‘border patrollers’ who can count as part of the modern liberal nation. This paper analyses 92 interviews with LGBT participants who live in six small and medium sized ordinary cities in Europe. It discusses how their fear of homophobia is evaluated according to perceived sexual and gendered norms and attitudes at the neighbourhood level. Neighbourhoods are considered either LGBT friendly or unfriendly according to their socio-demographic characteristics that focus on social class and/or migration and that intersects with race, ethnicity and religion. Based on the findings, neighbourhoods are both a geographical and a cultural terrain that can be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes that discipline and produce the confines of the normative, the ‘modern’ and the ‘backward’. Not only are LGBT people positioned as border patrollers but their fear of homophobia is also expressed through bordering. The neighbourhood can then be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes.

Keywords: sexual geography; LGBT; neighbourhoods; ordinary cities; homophobia; social class; race and ethnicity; migrant

1. Introduction

Many European countries have witnessed an increased recognition of LGBT people in society against the backdrop of wider social, cultural and legal changes. This does not take away from the fact that the current generation of LGBT people have lived through a historical period of intense homophobia when hiding ones’ sexual identity was necessary to protect oneself (Ghaziani 2015). The arrival of same sex marriage on its own does not bring closure to the discrimination that LGBT people may have to confront on an everyday basis. LGBT people have long been considered the ‘other’ as the status of heterosexuality is the default setting of sexuality in heteronormative society with its “authoritative construction of norms that privilege heterosexuality” (Fraser 1997, p. 18).

Big cities have been proclaimed as a big draw for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people for reasons of identity expression, anonymity, leisure and safety. The gay capitals have been studied extensively in terms of ‘gay villages’ and the ‘pink economy’ (Bell and Valentine 1995; Weston 1998). ‘Gay villages’ or ‘Gaybourhoods’ are areas with generally recognised boundaries that unofficially form a social centre for LGBT people. They have been perceived as fostering and sustaining a multitude of gay amenities, entertainment and leisure opportunities as well as businesses to serve the gay population. They have been critiqued for not being representative of the LGBT community, but also offer remoteness and anonymity from the social controls exerted by family and home communities (Collins 2004). Little is known about LGBT urbanisms beyond the gaybourhoods in metropolitan centres (Ghaziani 2015) and what life is like for LGBT people in small and medium sized
or ordinary cities, those with between 50,000 and 600,000 inhabitants (Brown 2008). This paper studies sexuality in ordinary as they are lived across the whole city, not just the inner-city leisure zones and gentrified neighbourhoods and without comparing them to gaybourhoods.

This research not only focuses on six ordinary cities, but on the neighbourhoods within them as the 92 LGBT interviews attach great importance to geography. Their perception of fear of homophobia is centred on them and its residents. This fear is significant in the lives of LGBT people and can feature more prominently in their lives than direct experiences of criminal acts (Moran and Skeggs 2004, p. 173). Neighbourhoods are considered either LGBT friendly or unfriendly according to their socio-demographic characteristics that focus on social class and/or migration and that intersects with race, ethnicity and religion. This paper goes on to explore how through this localised fear of homophobia, LGBT people themselves practice ‘othering’ of those inducing homophobia; the working-class and the non-white population in specific neighbourhoods in these six ordinary cities.

LGBT identities and recognitions are increasingly hailed as part of modern values and viewed as markers of achievements of Western democratic inclusion. European cities identify themselves around shared values of humanism, equality and tolerance. In the Netherlands, tolerance towards sexual minorities is used to measure the level of immigrant integration (Mepschen 2009). While the increased recognition of LGBT identities is an integral and undisputed part in measuring the achievements of Western democratic inclusion or modernity, it also creates a contrast, the ‘pre-modern’. LGBT issues have become emblematic of secure achievements and set in contrast to the lack of freedoms of ‘backwards’ or ‘pre-modern’ religious states, particular Islamic ones (Hemmings 2014). This goes hand in hand with an increased intolerant and repressive attitude towards migrants and racialised minorities—justified by their supposed threat to exactly these values (El-Tayeb 2012, p. 80). Muslims are considered homophobic and this is used as a justification for their inability to participate in the ‘modern’ even through migration when it has long been argued that homophobia is in fact a Western import.

Islam was once considered an inclusive civilisation (Dalacoura 2014). Even devout religious scholars considered homo-erotic desire as something natural and at times it was praised as a sign of civilization. At the beginning of the Ottoman rule in Constantinople in the sixteenth century, it was perceived as normal and even reinforced by the courts with young men becoming the focal points for the desire and attention of powerful office-holders (Andrews and Kalpakli 2005). In the Koran and hadith, not much is said about sexuality; certain verses, sayings and texts were only later interpreted in more repressive and patriarchal ways (Leezenberg cf. Suhonic 2018). During colonization homophobic laws were brought in that criminalised gay sex in the Middle East. European oppressive regimes used homophobic laws as a tool to control Muslims and the Middle East that was cemented by cultural imperialism (Massad 2007). European Victorian attitudes of hostility towards homosexuality were adopted by the modern-educated and westernised elites in the Middle East through its association with modernisation. With the arrival of nationalism and the nation state, new attitudes toward sexuality became also prominent in countries that were never colonized (Leezenberg cf. Suhonic 2018). While a transformation towards late modernity happened in the West during the second half of the 20th century during which the West was becoming more accepting towards homosexuality, the Middle East resisted this late modernisation (Giddens 1991). Homosexuality continued to be viewed as unacceptable in the Middle East and the links with European colonialism were increasingly ignored or forgotten. Instead, homosexuality became “an integral part of the Western cultural onslaught against ‘authentic’ Middle Eastern cultures” (Dalacoura 2014, p. 1295).

This paper is trying to unpack how fear of homophobia interconnects with sexual geography, identity politics and ideas of modernisation. Neighbourhoods are both a geographical and a cultural terrain that can be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes that discipline and produce the confines of the normative, the ‘modern’ and the ‘backward’. LGBT people are positioned
as border patrollers and they express their fear of homophobia through bordering. These border patrollers might not be asked to prevent illegal entry of immigrants entering the country but their fear of homophobia is used as a marker that justifies social intolerance and political discrimination against minorities, especially Islamophobia. Puar (2007) argues that those in power use homophobia to justify social intolerance against Muslims for their nationalist ideology. Here, those in power benefit from growing islamophobia as it can be harnessed to increase public support for geostrategic nationalist interests. The neighbourhood can then be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes.

1.1. Homonormativity and the Post-Gay Era in Europe

The West has become more accepting towards homosexuality from the second half of the 20th century but LGBT identities and rights have only recently been recognised in law. The opening up of marriage to same sex couples has been hailed not only as a sign of increased acceptance but also as a marker of achievements of Western democratic inclusion or modernisation. This marker of modernisation does not only create the ‘pre-modern’ but the new legal status has also been considered a way of ‘sanitising’ the LGBT community by assimilating it into its heteronormative society. Through same sex marriage, homonormativity assimilates ‘otherness’ back into the category of the same, providing one lives by heteronormative standards (Ahmed 2000). Homonormativity then describes sexual behaviour which rests on the assumption that LGBT people want to be a part of the dominant, mainstream, heterosexual culture by way of legal rights such as same sex marriage and having a family through adoption or surrogacy. The same sex marriage discourse attaches hegemonic meanings of gender and sexuality and perpetuates a policing of other kinds of relationships; tolerating ‘acceptable queer relationships’ while ‘othering’ diversity, or those persons who do not fit into a social group’s norm (Gallagher 2011). By pushing the political agenda of same sex marriage, the dominant liberal discourse also creates the ‘good gay’ while excluding the ‘other’ from its agenda (Rapcewicz 2016).

Homonormativity ‘others’ those within the LGBT community on the basis of a failure to assimilate to heteronormative structures; those who cannot or will not assimilate into these structures with its assumptions and institutions of marriage, reproduction and also consumption (Rapcewicz 2016; Hennessey 2000). Homonormativity then raises issues of privilege that are visible in the queer community, as they “intersect with white privilege, capitalism, sexism, trans misogyny, and cissexism, all of which end up leaving many people out of the movement toward greater sexual freedom and equality” (Kacere 2015, p. 1). For instance, it tends to be middle class individuals that marry within their own social class, and who form more stable unions, and this pattern may well soon be found in same sex unions too (Cherlin 2010).

Despite increasing acceptance by younger people, Taylor (2013) considers homonormativity as well as the pursuit of the queer lifestyle hostile and exclusive by way of consumption and/or of sexual behaviour. A disproportionate focus on identity as a fixed category invariably downplays structural barriers and political context. LGBT organisations have recognised the dominance of the “white, cis-male, middle class and highly educated hierarchy” (IGLYO 2014, p. 5) (see also ILGA Europe 2011). Homonormativity has been critiqued not only for its exclusiveness, but also for demobilising the gay constituency and opening up a privatised, de-politicised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (Duggan 2002). This fits in with the dramatic acceptance and ensuing assimilation of LGBT people into mainstream society in the so ‘post-gay’ era that has been defined as an era in which LGBT disentangle their sexual orientation from a sense of militancy and struggle and no longer see it as their main or only identity.

Ghaziani (2015) argues that with increased societal acceptance of gay people and ensuing assimilation in the post-gay era since 1998, ‘gaybourhoods’ may have become unnecessary and no longer needed to facilitate LGBT people and their needs and desires.
1.2. LGBT Place Making and Border Regimes

LGBT people articulate their fear of discrimination and violence among other things around concepts of space or ‘sexual geography’. Space still matters in questions of sexual conduct despite digitisation of the queer cyberspace, social media and internationalisation (Spruce 2020, p. 964; Hubbard 2018).

LGBT people might be comfortable or ‘out’ and visible in one space and therefore visible to other non-LGBT people in all or some spaces, or not in any. But how does a LGBT person know where to display intimacy, such as kissing or holding hands, with a same sex partner or in other words, when can they ‘undo’ gender by resisting the norms of heterosexuality? Age might matter here too; especially as older LGBT people will have spent a considerable part of their life learning to avoid discrimination and hate crime by hiding their sexuality. LGBT participants’ awareness of sexual tolerance and intolerance is organised not only by cities, but by spatial zones within them. Specific neighbourhoods are categorised as LGBT friendly or unfriendly, often with reference to their class, racial and ethnic composition. This intersectional categorisation then makes and shapes places.5

Theoretically, this place making can be seen as a key strategy for bordering. In order to contain sexual deviance, sexuality works as strategy for the “capture, containment and regulation of mobility and movement” (Holzberg et al. 2021, p. 1485). In other words, sexual identities, behaviours and discourses are also shaped within borders. A border is not only a divide but a ‘cultural terrain’ that disciplines and produces the queer, the troublesome and the confines of the normative. While research has focused on the struggle against state violence in nation states (Holzberg et al. 2021), this paper takes a neighbourhood perspective and shows that the neighbourhood can also be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes. Border regimes enable the division of space according to sexual and gendered norms with the dividing characteristics being defined along racist as well as classist lines.

Sexual and gendered norms play an important role in making populations and the places they reside in as ‘modern’ or as ‘backwards’ (Puarr 2007; Butler 2008). ‘Modern’ spaces tend to be perceived as tolerant towards the LGBT community while ‘backwards’ places can be associated with homophobia. Modernisation includes sexual modernity and this is associated with cosmopolitanism, urbanism and gentrification potential, in line with white and middle-class communities and spaces (Binnie and Skeggs 2004).

‘Backwards’ places can then become associated with working-class and/or non-white communities as well as the economically and/or racially marginalised (El-Tayeb 2012). These communities might then become stigmatised through association with ‘out of date’ attitudes towards sexuality (El-Tayeb 2012; Binnie and Skeggs 2004). It could be argued that by celebrating ‘queer friendly neighbourhoods’, class and racialised hierarchies can become arguably naturalised (Spruce 2020). This further legitimises ‘othering’ or the production of social division and social exclusion by stigmatising the working-class and migrants of all sexualities (Stanko 2001). It also legitimises the displacement of these residents in the name of progress and makes place for the middle-class in form of gentrification in these neighbourhoods (Spruce 2020).

1.3. LGBT Attitudes and Religion

European attitude surveys confirm that LGBT attitudes vary by geographical neighbourhoods (European Commission 2019). The lowest level of acceptance towards gay and lesbians was expressed by large city dwellers while residents of suburbs or outskirts of big cities showed the highest level of acceptance. The low level of acceptance is tentatively explained as the reaction to the concentration of a LGBT population in big cities and the growing concentration of immigrants in the same cities, some with cultural and religious views that do not accept LGBT people. According to a social survey that examined 26 European Union states and Eastern European countries, Muslims and followers of the Eastern Orthodox Church expressed the lowest levels of agreement with the statement that “gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish” (Takács and Szalma 2011). Many religious institutions
take heterosexuality for granted as the normal and desired form of sexual organisation and treat homosexuality as deviant, undesirable, dysfunctional in addition to sinful (O'Brien 2015). For some, homosexuality became a central part “of the Western cultural onslaught against ‘authentic’ Middle Eastern cultures” (Dalacoura 2014, p. 1295).

While many Muslims consider homosexuality as unacceptable, the reality is more complex. Hostility towards homosexuality is not a universal sentiment amongst those who define themselves by religion: most Muslim MPs in the British Parliament voted in favour of same sex marriage legislation in 2013 and every Muslim MP voted for the same sex marriage legislation in Germany in 2017 (BBC News 2013; Wilford 2017). Despite protest, the first gay friendly mosque was set up in Paris in France in 2012. Muslims LGBT people might not conform to the normative coming out process, but that does not mean that there are no Muslim LGBT people or that there is no diversity in Muslim communities. In public discourse, the migrant Muslim community has been constructed as static and repressive (El-Tayeb 2012). LGBT Islamic activism movement is also evidence of the development of alternative attitudes (Human Rights Watch 2018; Muslims for Progressive Values 2008).

Educational attainment, particularly in terms of higher education is an important determinant in propagating liberal attitudes towards LGBTs in almost every EU country; representative surveys have repeatedly found a stronger increase in positive attitudes towards homosexuality among higher educated, secular, and non-conservative individuals in countries with greater same-sex rights (Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2021). Other attitude surveys also find that state with protective laws have a much warmer climate towards LGBT people than those states without such laws (Hasenbusch et al. 2014). Women and young people also hold more tolerant attitudes (Takács and Szalma 2011) A meta study of 35 democracies concludes that economic conditions are related to attitudes towards homosexuality. Social class together with national prosperity interact in their effects on attitudes and economic inequality contributes to intolerant social and political values while it also undermines social trust and produces more general negative attitudes toward minority groups, including lesbian and gay people (Andersen and Fetner 2008).

As LGBT identities and recognitions are increasingly hailed as part of modern values and viewed as markers of achievements of Western democratic inclusion, it might well be socially unacceptable to be seen to be sceptical of immigrants (Dovidio et al. 2002). Xenophobia is learned through tacit or implicit learning in early socialisation of prejudice and it is both ‘automatic’ and robust to change at the same time (Hoy-Petersen 2021). Accordingly, people may not have become more tolerant or even less xenophobic over time, but instead manage their talk and behaviour in accordance with increasingly egalitarian cultural norms and value shifts that shape and define acceptable forms of talking or ‘honourable talk’ (Rozin et al. 1999; Pugh 2014, p. 160).

2. Methodology

2.1. The Six Mid-Sized Ordinary Cities

This research analyses interviews collected in the context of the Divercity Project that examines homophobia and hate crimes between 2015 and 2017 (Divercity 2018). The project was co-funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship (REC) Programme of the European Union. It focuses on experiences and perceptions of LGBT people and employees of local governments, public services and Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs) in six small and medium sized cities in five European Union countries (Klett-Davies 2019).

The cities selected for the Divercity project range from small ones such as Girona (Spain) to medium sized ones such as Charleroi (Belgium) and Sabadell (Spain) to larger medium sized cities such as Nottingham (UK), Thessaloniki (Greece) and Wroclaw (Poland). Some of the cities (Charleroi, Sabadell) have experienced considerable deindustrialisation and high unemployment in recent decades. They, as well as Nottingham, which has also seen its manufacturing capacity decline in the past few decades, have attracted migrants. Others (Thessaloniki, Wroclaw) are today relatively ethnically homogeneous, though with
a multicultural past which has increasingly been deployed to present these cities as an open place.

These six cities are at different stages in terms of LGBT legislation. The ILGA Rainbow Europe Index measures LGBT favourable policies in 49 EU countries annually (ILGA Europe 2021). In terms of LGBT legislation, Belgium ranks in 2nd place, the UK ranks in 10th place (Spain in 8th place, and Greece in 18th place). Poland is ranked in 43rd place, near the bottom. A special Eurobarometer survey indicates that, of the five countries discussed, Greek public opinion together with Poland’s is most opposed to homosexual marriages and to child adoption by same-sex couples (European Commission 2019).

Greece took considerably longer to adopt laws regulating same-sex partnerships, and as of 2020, Poland still lacks the first basic form of recognition of same-sex unions. Belgium (2003) and Spain (2005) were among the first to allow same-sex couples to marry. Greece and Poland have yet to reach this outcome. Finally, Spain has allowed adoption by same-sex couples in 2005, Belgium in 2006 and the United Kingdom in 2008 (Dotti Sani and Quaranta 2021). Poland does not legally recognise same-sex couples through marriage and only Greece but not Poland has a civil partnership agreement since 2015. Same-sex couples still have no rights to adoption nor have lesbians’ access to IVF treatment (Pavlou 2009; Baer et al. 2016; Kopra and Sakellariou 2016). Other attitude surveys also find that state with protective laws have a much warmer climate towards LGBT people than those states without such laws (Hasenbusch et al. 2014).

None of the six cities have a gay village, perhaps due to fears of ghettoization or loss of anonymity in a medium sized city, their economically unviability or because of the proximity to large gay friendly cities (e.g., Barcelona in the case of Sabadell and Girona and Brussels in the case of Charleroi).

2.2. The Interview Data

As part of the Divercity project, interviews were designed and conducted to produce a diagnostic report about the needs and lives of LGBT people and about the dimensions of homo-and transphobia in small and medium cities across Europe. The aims and objective were to serve as a way of sharing best practices and to promote innovative measures to prevent and combat this social problem.

The six city teams consisted mostly of lecturers and researchers from five universities with considerable experience in researching sensitive topics: Universitat de Barcelona, Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Middlesex University London, Universitat de Girona, University of Wroclaw and The Family and Childcare Centre (KMOP) Athens (Jubany et al. 2016). Together, they conducted 155 face to face semi-structured interviews with people who were non-migrants and white as well as relatively well educated. One third of the interviews were with stakeholders (63) whose sexual orientation is mostly unknown. Some of the stakeholders were also LGBT people and a few of them were interviewed twice, in their professional role as a stakeholder and for a second time as a LGBT interviewee. The stakeholders consisted of people who are lawyers, the police, members of LGBT associations and services as well as teachers, doctors, advocacy and advice organisations and council workers. For the purpose of this research, only the 92 LGBT interview transcripts have been analysed.

The city teams interviewed individuals from the range of categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The interviewees were recruited through requests on notice boards in their offices and through announcements on council and stakeholder websites. Ninety-two interviews were conducted with LGBT individuals. Almost half of the 92 LGBT participants were gay (41) and almost one third lesbian (27). The number of individual interviews ranged from 14 in Charleroi to 17 in Sabadell. It proved difficult to reach participants who identified as bisexual (9) or transgender (15) (see Table 1).
Most participants have high levels of educational attainment, with the majority having completed higher education and their age range was widespread, from 18 to 72 years old. In four of the six cities, the majority professed to be non-religious. The exceptions were Thessaloniki and Wroclaw where most identified with a religious (see Table 2).

Table 2. Education level, age and religious affiliation of individual interviewees (Kofman et al. 2017).

| City       | Education—University Degree or Higher | Education—Secondary School | Education—Primary School Leaver | Total | Age (Years) | Religion None |
|------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------------|---------------|
| Charleroi  | 10                                   | 4                           | -                               | 14    | 22–58       | 10            |
| Girona     | 7                                    | 6                           | 3                               | 16    | 23–58       | 13            |
| Nottingham | 11                                   | 3                           | -                               | 14    | 19–70       | 11            |
| Sabadell   | 11                                   | 4                           | 2                               | 17    | 18–68       | 14            |
| Thessaloniki | 9                                   | 6                           | -                               | 15    | 24–58       | 2             |
| Wroclaw    | 9                                    | 7                           | -                               | 16    | 20–72       | 6             |
| Total      | 57                                   | 30                          | 5                               | 92    | 18–72       | 56            |

The interviews were held in the country’s main language (Catalan, English, French, Greek and Polish). The city teams transcribed, coded and analysed each interview according to a specific set of questions and each interview analysis formed the basis of a fact sheet in English, which can be described as an interview summary. One of the sections referred explicitly to the “Intersection between sexual and gender expression and other socio-economic and demographic characteristics such as age, ethnicity, disability, religion”. This section asked the researcher to analyse the interview according to: “What is the impact of these intersectional features on LGBT person’s everyday life; quality of services they are able to access (such as health and social care); use of public spaces; if aspects of intersectionality can be identified that are different from what has been already highlighted above”. The fact sheets were analysed and form the basis of this research.

2.3. Limitations

There are limitations to this ‘secondary data analysis’ approach. First, findings might have been ‘lost in translation’ as the city teams translated the fact sheets in their second or third language. Secondly, the teams (and each interviewer) will have different understandings of the intersecting categories based on their knowledge, experience and interests and their understanding of intersectionality within their academic discipline. Each interviewer will have attached their own meaning to social class and ethnicities while also possessing a deep knowledge of ‘their’ city and its neighbourhoods.

The findings also over-represent the perceptions by and experiences of gay men and women. Seven out of the nine interview quotes used in this paper are also from gay men. The analysis of the original transcripts could yield a greater understanding about the issues
that transgender and queer people face within the context of social class and ethnicities and about the heterogeneous experiences and perceptions of LGBT people.

Furthermore, in research, participants are inclined to suppress and hide their more aversive automatic responses to cultural and ethnic difference from view as it is not considered ‘honourable talk’ (Pugh 2014, p. 160).

3. Findings

3.1. Sabadell’s Neighbourhoods: Bordering by Migration and Social Class

In Sabadell, an imaginary LGBT friendly border seems to run between the city centre and the suburban areas and the discourse is frequently framed within the context of education, ethnicity or religion that make up a specific culture. Some participants perceive the city centre, a largely middle-class residential area, as a friendly and safe area for LGBT people, whilst the more ethnically diverse suburbs are perceived as hostile spaces. According to the interview factsheets, the differences are attributed to the cultural traits of some of the suburban residents, especially the Muslim and Roma population. The Roma themselves are considered to be at great risk of not only poverty but also of systematic structural and symbolic oppression and denigration in all aspects of life (Koldinska 2009):

“The place where I live is a low-income neighbourhood, most of the people are Roma and Muslim, and they do not accept these relationships (homosexual couples). Whereas, in the city centre people are kissing and go hand in hand”.

(transgender person)

This quote shows that the city centre of Sabadell is more LGBT friendly than the outskirts. In comparison, the Eurobarometer survey found a lower level of acceptance towards gay and lesbians in city centres of large cities (European Commission 2019). Specific areas are also singled out

“For instance, here we have the Can Puiggener neighbourhood of which I’d say 70% is migrated people, sub-Saharan, etc., and the few national people that live here well they’re quite deprived (. . . ) they don’t look upon it (homosexuality) with the same kind of normality due to the education that they have, the culture that they have”. (gay man)

A gay teacher makes a distinction between centre-periphery on ‘cultural’ grounds: “The central area of any city is a lot more affable with the gays, black people (. . . ) whilst the peripheral neighbourhoods often have a lower cultural level. And that’s where most of the problems can occur”. At the same time, he mentions that he has taught in schools in the peripheral neighbourhoods and has always been treated with respect while his sexual orientation was public knowledge. This shows the complex issues of fear, of perceptions and experiences and how othering happens. It also shows how the participants seemingly automatically ‘lump’ people together in their mind, a trait confirmed by Kahneman (2011).

The Sabadell city report describes the case study of a gay man who is considered a paradigmatic case of a ‘socially acceptable’ homosexual model: He owns a company, is financially secure and married to his lifelong boyfriend (Jubany et al. 2016). He recognises that he and his husband are “a reference in the city” which evidences the importance of the social class variable in the experiences of the LGBT-phobia. The couple’s high social, cultural, and economic capital contributes not only to social acceptance but also provides the necessary resources to prevent them from feeling fearful. There are certain neighbourhoods that this participant considers to be LGBT unfriendly due to its high Roma and migrant population but he doesn’t have first-hand experience of homophobia and tends to go to nearby Barcelona or the centre of Sabadell: “I’ve never been in a situation where I could observe whether one could hold hands in this neighbourhood” (gay man).

3.2. Thessaloniki’s Neighbourhoods: Bordering by Social Class and Migration

The metropolitan area of Thessaloniki has a population of 1,104,460 inhabitants according to the last census of 2011. The city’s port serves as a critical transportation hub for
Greece and South-eastern Europe in general. The manufacture sector has been severely hit by the crisis since 2010 and the growing service sector also been affected.

Greek society is still quite traditional concerning gender roles and some Greek men are less open concerning issues of sexuality as they hold more traditional values. Surveys highlight that mothers are more tolerant than fathers towards LGBT children (Kofman et al. 2017). A few transgender interviewees have had traumatic experiences of coming out, with some being forced out of their homes and having to cut contact with their family.

Thessaloniki has popular gay friendly bars, restaurants and cultural places. The interviewees felt that over the last few years, LGBT tolerance has increased but not many felt comfortable about displaying affection in public.

The Thessaloniki city team reports a classed and raced discourse. LGBT participants consider those who live in the eastern parts of the city more LGBT friendly. It is populated by those with higher level education and occupations that guarantee a higher standard of living despite the economic downturn in Greece (Kopra and Sakellariou 2016). Most of the cultural offerings are also located in the east while the municipalities to the west of Thessaloniki are becoming home to new immigrants, often from Bulgaria and Albania, and these are predominantly working-class industrial areas (Hatziprokopiou 2006):

“I feel very safe and free to express my feelings to my partner . . . I feel very well accepted in my neighbourhood in Kalamaria (area at the southeast of Thessaloniki)”.

3.3. Girona: Bordering by Migration

Girona is the smallest of the six cities and it is unique in the sense that it is perceived as a close-knit and conservative city characterised by close family ties and lack of anonymity (Langarita et al. 2016). Nearby Barcelona is not only the destination for consumption and entertainment but also for anonymity which highlights that the time for gaybourhoods has not come to an end yet. There is a dichotomous relationship around the lack of anonymity in Girona. While it is characterised as a city that exerts social control it is also appreciated for its sense of social support and security that the participants experience in this small city. The LGBT coming out narrative might not apply here.

On the right bank of the river next to Girona is municipality of Salt with a population of 30,000. As the physical separation between Girona and Salt is not clear cut, it is frequently seen as an extension of Girona although it is in a different municipality. Salt has the highest rate of migration in the whole of Catalonia with a migrant population of 40 per cent. The quote below shows how it is considered LGBT unfriendly together with two of Girona’s neighbourhoods Font de la Półvora and Santa Eugènia. The interviewee remarks on the intolerance of migrants and simultaneously reflects on this prejudicial remark, showing awareness of ‘honourable talk’:

“No now I will look . . . like racist, and it’s not the case, right? But I think that, for instance, Salt, Font de la Półvora, Santa Eugènia . . . I know they’re neighbourhoods where you can . . . For instance, I have an acquaintance who lives there . . . And he’s got no problems, well, look, I’ve got two friends who are a couple and they live in Salt, and they don’t have any problems. But . . . Well, maybe now I’m speaking in ignorance, but well, I figure that right in the middle of Salt’s main street, if you French kiss with a guy, you’ll be called a ‘fag’ for sure. Well, maybe no, eh? Well, this sounds terrible towards the immigrant community . . . “.

(gay man)

This quote shows how individual experience, or in this case the ‘second hand’ experience can be different from the perceived expectations and how expressed intimacy is negotiated according to neighbourhoods, and their inhabitants’ imagined responses. The participant is quick to acknowledge that an opinion may be the product of prejudice rather than from learned experience. This shows awareness of a discourse of multiculturalism that some say makes it impossible to challenge the cultural practices of immigrants for fear of
being called racist (Lewis 2013). While this quote could be interpreted as being xenophobic it also entails an expression of uncertainty as well as the recognition of sameness expressed by showing solidarity amongst minorities.

3.4. Wroclaw’s Neighbourhoods: Bordering by Social Class and Right-Wing Politics

Wroclaw has few migrants and the racialised neighbourhood discourse is not a feature in the fact sheets. Homophobia is not discussed in terms of neighbourhoods and ethnicity but in terms of economic resources and other Poles who hold extreme homophobic views. With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, social exclusion and inequality fuelled the far-right discourse. Consequently, lower classes and those harmed by the neoliberal transformation supported the populist right in the political sphere (Zuk and Zuk 2019).

Neo-Nazis are identified as a threat specifically to men as one of the interviewees says ironically: “Neo-Nazis respect ladies”. One gay interviewee feels uncomfortable when he uses public transport during a football match as he was once severely beaten by two homophobic men, when he was waiting for the bus at night with his gay friends.

The interviewees in Wroclaw are all ethnic Poles, usually relatively well or very well educated, but their economic standings and their life styles vary. A gay interviewee considers safety a problem depending on economic resources in terms of use of transport and housing. Wroclaw might seem a safe city for those who can afford the housing and mode of transport that acts as a protective buffer:

“The city may appear as ‘gay-friendly’ for an upper-class man living in a security guarded estate, who visits jet set clubs, but not for a person from the outskirts who comes back from a disco on Saturday night on the bus”. (gay man)

3.5. Nottingham’s Neighbourhoods: Bordering by Social Class and Migration

In Nottingham, 38 per cent of the population is non-white (Office for National Statistics 2011). The LGBT friendliness of the city centre is perceived as being far greater compared to the suburbs newly arrived migrant communities, who tend to concentrate in peripheral areas were also identified as being less LGBT tolerant. Social class did not form a conspicuous dimension of the interviews but while it is not discussed directly in the interviews, it does frame some of the discussion more obliquely, for example in terms of clothing:

“Nottingham is quite friendly to LGBT people but Nottingham is a deprived city and with that comes people who are not that accepting of LGBT people, though this may be a stereotype. I am not going to get verbally assaulted by men in suits but assaulted by men in sportswear. Nottingham is not affluent, has a high rate of crime”. (gay man)

While this quote shows how the fear of homophobia is classed, it is recognised as stereotyping at the same time, showing an awareness of value shifts and the awareness that it is socially unacceptable to be sceptical of immigrants (Hoy-Petersen 2021).

Two areas of Nottingham have very high social and economic deprivation and a gay interviewee feels ambivalent about walking through these deprived areas alone or with a partner. He reflects though, that this might be based on the assumption that people from ethnic minorities are more prejudiced against LGBT people, and not based on experience. Another interviewee feels uncomfortable expressing affection in the Asian and Muslim neighbourhood that she lives in and she has heard from a Muslim gay person that there are heightened levels of homophobia in the Muslim community.

3.6. Charleroi: Absence of Bordering, at Least for Gay Men

In the analysis of the fact sheets of the 23 interviews conducted in Charleroi, no references to borders and boundaries are being made and there is no evidence of a geographic discourse or a neighbourhood comparison. The city is ethnically diverse and characterised by the absence of areas organised around ethnic, migrant or LGBT communities. This is also the case for migrant people who are not concentrated in specific areas (Carles 2019).
In case of Charleroi, economic issues might be a great leveller as well as the lack of neighbourhood’s that are organised around migrant communities. It seems that migrants reside everywhere and therefore bordering might not take place. The dominant discourse seems to be around economic deprivation:

“I never perceived difficulties in relation to homosexuality in the city. ( . . . ) it is seen as normal ( . . . ). The main problem in Charleroi is the social situation of people”. (lesbian woman)

The LGBT interviewees do not perceive their city as particularly problematic with regards to the LGBT population. One gay man classes Charleroi as a ‘safe’ city:

“I would not like to belong to a specific LGBT community because I do not like the idea of living only with gay people. I prefer to be mixed in, to see everybody and not just gay people. In Charleroi, this is possible because when you go to places which are not specifically LGBT and you are a gay, there is no problem”. (gay man)

The LGBT population feels secure in most parts of the city but this holds true mainly for gay men Carles (2019) finds that transgender people and to lesser extent lesbians, have a less positive experience of the city. However, these findings might have been mentioned in the interviews with the stakeholders only.

4. Discussion

LGBT participants in this study move around in their city with an awareness of geographical areas that they feel or perceive to be more or less LGBT friendly. This fear is imagined but that doesn’t make it less relevant or less important and LGBT people are being attacked and discriminated against.

With the exception of Charleroi and Wroclaw, the demarcation of neighbourhoods is quite clear. Areas that are deemed safe tend to be the middle-class areas while the economically deprived, ethnically diverse and working-class areas are more likely to be perceived as unsafe. It is an interesting finding that the LGBT interviewees do not consider these diverse neighbourhoods as more accepting of sexual diversity and this perception might further contribute to the increase of social as well as geographical polarisation. Terms such as social class and ethnicity are not used but instead referenced through geography such as: suburbs, west or east, city centre versus periphery as well as clothing (sportswear in Nottingham) and political views (Neo-Nazis in Wroclaw). The use of terms such as ‘they’, ‘migrated people’, ‘Roma’, ‘lower educated’ are terms that give danger an inflection that is classed and/or raced.

Fear of homophobia and social class intersect with ethnicity and religion according to certain geographical boundaries within a city. Those from a different culture, migrants, and those with a different ‘cultural level’ become a source of fear that is embedded within the city. The interviews make the distinction in terms of religion, migration and/or class which constitutes an assemblage of otherness. ‘Othering’ happens with a focus on either the working class—in the case of Nottingham and neo-Nazis in Wroclaw or on migrants—either Muslim and Roma (in the case of Girona and Sabadel) or Asians and Muslims (Nottingham) or Eastern Europeans (Thessaloniki). The participants talk about their fear in terms of geographical borders in their city and have developed strategies to deal with this fear, ranging from avoidance tactics to behaviour change This place making shows that ‘unsafe’ neighbourhoods are positioned in opposition to ‘safe’ neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods are discussed in terms of binaries, that are established between the ‘modern’ and the ‘backwards’; with the ‘modern’ being more LGBT friendly, more highly educated and homogeneous which is contrasted with the ‘backwards’, ethnically diverse neighbourhoods with a population with lower levels of educational attainment.

Wroclaw’s participants focus on Neo-Nazis. Poland has become increasingly anti-democratic and the so-called sexual minorities have become—along with refugees, Muslims, Ukrainians, Jews or ‘leftists’—one of the many groups ostracised in popular discourse
For wealthy LGBT people, the city might feel more LGBT friendly compared to poorer LGBT people, such as those living in the outskirts of the city and those using public transport. Participants from Thessaloniki celebrated queer friendliness throughout the city and no evidence of ‘othering’ could be found in the interviewee factsheets. Interestingly, in the small city of Girona itself, neighbourhoods seem to also be evaluated by the level of anonymity they afford and this stands in contrast to the queer culture that stresses ‘outness’. However, they have in common with Muslim LGBTs that they consider that this ‘outness’ would bring shame for their families within the community (El-Tayeb 2012).

5. Conclusions

LGBT’s fear of homophobia is played out geographically in this study of six small and medium sized cities. Borders separate LGBT friendly or tolerant neighbourhoods from LGBT unfriendly neighbourhoods and the markers are social class and ethnicity and race, that also intersect with religion. It becomes apparent that a border is not only a divide but a ‘cultural terrain’ that disciplines and produces the queer, the troublesome and the confines of the normative. Neighbourhoods are both a geographical and a cultural terrain that can be understood, organised and contested through a sexuality discourse in the production of border regimes that discipline and produce the confines of the normative, the ‘modern’ and the ‘backward’.

Not only are LGBT people positioned as border patrollers, as markers of the modern liberal nation, but their fear of homophobia is also expressed through bordering. The perception of neighbourhoods as homophobic play an important role in making places and the people who reside in them as ‘modern’ or as ‘backwards’, with ‘backwards’ places being associated with homophobia (Butler 2008). Puar’s (2007) homonationalism develops how those in power are using homophobia and LGBT social movements to justify social intolerance against Muslims to further their nationalist ideology and geostrategic influences, while at the same time ignoring homophobia and lack of social equality in Western society.

Places are thought of in binaries: LGBT friendly places are linked to modernity and are associated with white and/or middle-class spaces. ‘Backwards’ places are associated ‘out of date’ attitudes towards sexuality, with working-class and/or non-white communities, Muslim, Roma or Eastern European migrants. As part of their stigmatisation, class and racialised hierarchies can arguably become naturalised and become part of the production of social division and social exclusion (Stanko 2001). The stigmatisation of particular groups as homophobic can be used to characterise such groups as unable to participate in ‘the modern liberal nation’ even through migration. This allows othering to take place.

LGBT people are finding themselves as “positioned as border patrollers who can count as part of ‘the modern liberal nation’, irrespective of the paradoxes such a position may engender in relation to their own recognition” (Hemmings 2014, p. 378). Instead, ‘Islam’ and ‘Europe’ have become incompatible through the positing of homophobia as defining characteristics of Muslim communities. In the mainstream discourse Islam is framed as a social order that dictates every aspect of the life of every Muslim and therefore as incompatible with ‘European values’ of tolerance and democracy (El-Tayeb 2012). This idea is also being used to foster and justify new forms of marginalisation and surveillance of others as those who are thought of as opposed to liberal social values. Discourses around gay rights and sexual diversity are increasingly pitted against presumably homophobic and intolerant migrant ‘others’. Hence, LGBT inclusion can be considered as having led to increasingly counter-progressive effects such as consolidating nationalism and xenophobia (Butler 2008). This fits into the colonial discourse against which the colonised must construct themselves. Here, sexual norms are used as a tool to distinguish the ‘premodern savage’ from the ‘modern colonizer’ (Butler 2008).

It can be argued that border regimes, just like othering, “further legitimises the displacement and disciplining of poor and/or non-white residents of all sexualities in the
name of progress” (Spruce 2020, p. 965). Progress then can be understood as an enabler of gentrification that translates into place making for the white middle-class in form of gentrification. In other words, feelings of safety may be related with gentrification that tends to go hand in hand with a displacement of the migrant and working-class population in these neighbourhoods (Spruce 2020).

It is not only Muslim communities who are excluded from the modern liberal nation. The queer emphasis on ‘outness’ stresses the need to display an authentic and self-affirming collective identity which puts moral pressures on individual members to conform to a given group culture, such as a consumerist lifestyle and homonormativity. This promotes exclusivity and advantages male, white and middle-class LGBT people and is in line with processes of neoliberalisation that produce queer winners and losers (Binnie 2014). It excludes those who cannot or do not want to conform to homonormativity, a consumerist lifestyle and outness, and it fails to promote respectful interaction within multi-cultural contexts. Hence, Muslim LGBT among others are excluded from being border patrollers.

Identity politics has achieved wide social, cultural and legal changes through the recognition of cultural injustices but critics feel that the emphasis on identity politics has come to the expense of economic inequalities in society. The turn to identity politics has replaced memories of social egalitarianism and where a politics of recognition displaces the politics of redistribution; it may actually promote economic inequality, and forms an unholy alliance with neoliberal capitalism (Ball 2003). The recognition of a social group by the dominant, hegemonic culture of a society can also imply its assimilation and conformism with ruling ideologies of privatised, self-reliant subjectivities (Fraser 2013).

LGBT people’s fear could then be seen as both the flipside of a neoliberal society that is inherently based on competition, autonomy and self-drive of which differentiation, hierarchy and exclusivity are an outcome (Ball 2003). The way modernity, freedom and gay rights are framed becomes the method by which conformism and compliance are secured—which includes the othering of ethnically diverse and economically deprived neighbourhoods. It also allows the system to continue undisturbed.

**Funding:** The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article. The interviews on which this article is based are part of the 2016–2017 research project: “DIVERCITY Preventing and combating homo- and transphobia in small and medium cities across Europe”. This project received funding from the Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security, European Commission (JUST/2013/FRC/AG).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Research Ethics Committees of the six research partners involved prior to conducting the empirical part for the study: Universitat de Barcelona, Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Middlesex University London, Universitat de Girona, University of Wroclaw and The Family and Childcare Centre (KMOP) Athens.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data supporting reported results can be provided on request.

**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank the DIVERCITY research teams in Charleroi, Girona, Nottingham, Sabadell, Thessaloniki and Wroclaw. I am grateful to the teams for their work. I am also thankful to the research participants for volunteering their time and for the helpful comments from the anonymous reviewers.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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