Sex in/and Sweden: Sexual rights discourses and radical sexual politics in Sweden

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Abstract: Tracing historical as well as current understandings that contribute to shape discourses of sexual rights, this article aims to show how particular understandings of sexuality interact in the discursive production of Sweden as a modern, rational and liberal nation. Inspired by recent developments in queer theory, I engage in a broader critique of how understandings of sexuality intersect with notions of gender, class, “race”/ethnicity and national identity. With departure in three historical points of impact for the development of sexual rights, I provide a historical contextualization to tease out the specific features of sexual rights’ discourses in this context. Guided by an interest to study how particular discourses of sexual rights come to retain a status as legitimate and “true”, I then conduct a close reading of a graphic novel, as well as of the reception of this novel. Finding that normative understandings of love and sexuality in mainstream culture sustain their status by a selective inclusion of more radical views, I show that the dominant view of sexual rights in Sweden is ambivalent. Here, I use discourse analysis to illuminate how notions of equality is constructed through processes of normalization. Drawing on these findings, I conclude the article by arguing for the need of a critical engagement with norms as collective sites for political resistance.

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Mia Liinason is Wallenberg Academy fellow and associate professor in Gender Studies at the Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg, Sweden. She is researching transnational feminist and LGBTQ-activist movements. This article is part of a broader comparative research project aiming to expand our understandings of how transnational encounters in the struggle for women’s and LGBTQ-rights in Scandinavia, Turkey and Russia enable new meanings, new political subjectivities and new collective identities. Researchers in this project are also interested in studying how feminist and LGBTQ-actors understand, negotiate and articulate women’s and sexual rights in relation to particular geopolitical histories in these contexts, to which this article contributes with crucial knowledge. 

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

What can we learn today from the depiction of Sweden in the late 1960s as the land of sin? And how does that fit with the characterization of Sweden in the 1990s as a women friendly nation? Clearly, in western societies, discourses of sexual rights and gender equality are linked with wider understandings of modernity, rationality and liberalism. Yet, such discourses have a certain normative effect. Tracing the historically variegated origins of present-day discourses of sexual rights in Sweden, this article examines how notions of sexuality and sexual rights come to retain their status as acceptable and true. It shows that normative understandings of love and sexuality in mainstream culture sustain their dominance by a selective inclusion of more radical views. Understanding these dynamics can support political projects in developing tools to expand limiting standards of gendered subjectivity and sexual conduct. By so doing, it can contribute to realize radical political democracy.
The debates around sexual politics in Sweden can be described as multi-faceted and complex, imbued by the political interests of opinion makers, which includes feminist interests. If, in the late 1960s, Sweden was internationally characterized as the land of sin, the land of “sexuality, promiscuity, and frivolity” (Glover & Marklund, 2009, p. 492), the international characterization of Sweden in the 1990s had altered to a women-friendly society, number one on the gender equality list, and a feminist utopia (News from NIKK, 1999, p. 5).

Historically, Swedish politicians and opinion makers have often expressed attitudes and proposed legislations around sex that in an international context have been understood as progressive. Keen on producing and maintaining an image of Sweden as a “good society, an international defender of human rights, a paragon of gender equality” (Hellgren & Hobson, 2008, p. 398), the question of rights and attitudes in relation to sexual practices has been an important issue for Swedish politicians and opinion makers during the whole welfare-state project and still so today. The dominant discourses in Sweden around sex in its various shapes and forms have, however, been shifting over the latest 50 years. As I hope to show in this article, the link, though, between these variegated discourses, is that they all take part in the further production of an “officially sanctioned, ‘good’ sexuality” (Ambjörnsson, 2006, p. 99) through connections between sexual liberation and women’s liberation, between sex and democracy, based on ideas of good, normal and healthy sex, contributing to the construction of Sweden as a modern, rational and, subsequently, liberal nation.

Recently, several feminist and queer scholars have highlighted the importance of context in queer academic as well as activist practices. In contrast to the assumed US hegemony in understandings of queer as a concept, theory and practice, queer scholars in Europe have, among other issues, examined the ways in which notions of queer are taken up differently in different European national contexts (Downing & Gillett, 2011), they have analysed how the place of research impacts on diverse queer methodologies (Browne & Nash, 2010) and studied Central and Eastern European sexualities in transition (Mizielska & Kulpa, 2012). Such explorations into the geographies of sexuality demonstrate that sexual identity seldom is the sole determining factor in marking certain sexual practices as “deviant” (Kemp, 2009; Shah, 2005). Indeed, showing that a series of negative differentiations, such as “normal/abnormal, healthy/pathological, presentable/obscene,” transgress the dyad of homosexual/heterosexual, David Dibosa highlights how processes of normalization work through a range of intersecting corporatized social practices, producing forms of “normalized homosexuality as well as [...] obscene heterosexuality” (Dibosa, 2009, p. 253). As a result of these debates, there is a growing interest for intersectionality in queer analyses, providing a broad critique of how sex and sexuality intersect with gender, “race”/ethnicity, class, functionality, national identity and/or age in specific contextual locations (El-Tayeb, 2012; Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005; Haritaworn, 2015).

Inspired by these recent developments in queer theory, this article analyses how discourses of sexuality and sexual rights are used as political tools in the production of Sweden as a nation. Following a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, this article suggests that a study of discourse is most fruitfully conducted by a focus “on discourse-as-knowledge”, that is, by a study of the “social, historical and political conditions under which statements come to count as true or false” (Hook, 2001, p. 542). In this spirit, I will highlight the historically variegated origins of contemporary discourses of sexual rights in Sweden and emphasize discontinuities or contradictions in them, to examine the values, discourses and understandings that jolt to shape discourses of sexuality and sexual rights (Foucault, 1980; Hall, 1997; Hook, 2001). Altogether, this article aims to show how particular understandings of sexuality interact in the discursive production of Sweden as a modern, rational and liberal nation. I take my starting point in three historical points of impact for the development of sexual rights (the 1960s, the 1990s and the early 2010s). I provide a historical contextualization to tease out the specific features of these discourses and demonstrate how they connect to the
production of the nation. Then, guided by an interest to study how particular discourses of sexual rights come to sustain a status as legitimate and “true”, I conduct a close reading of the popular graphic novel *Prins Charles känsla* (*Prince Charles’ feeling*), published by Liv Strömquist in 2010, as well as of the reception of the novel. In this close reading, I focus on details in the texts, such as words and phrases, but I also pay attention to how the texts interact with existing discourses. Aspiring to visualize the contextuality and historicity of all forms of readings, I read the graphic novel and the reviews of the novel from a critical standpoint, primarily concerned with how understandings of sexuality and love are represented in these texts, and how these understandings serve to support or challenge dominant discourses (Lukic & Sánchez Espinoza, 2011). At first, in my close reading of *Prins Charles känsla*, I analyse how the use of stylistic figures in the text (such as repetition, contrast, contextual and temporal shifts etc.) produces a displacement of meaning that destabilizes dominant discourses of sexuality and love. I then identify how the novel produces another and more radical understanding than existing dominant understandings of sexuality and love. Secondly, in my engagement with the reception of the graphic novel, I close read reviews of the novel published in daily newspapers, tabloids and online media in Sweden. In my analysis of this material, I study words and phrases used, to grasp the general assessment and main characteristics of the novel in the reviews. I then analyse how the graphic novel’s representation of sexuality and love is understood in the reviews and I examine how these understandings interact with dominant notions of sexuality and love in a Swedish context. After this, I engage in a discussion about both these readings, where I contrast the understandings of love and sexuality presented in the reviews, with the more radical understandings in the graphic novel. I find that dominant understandings of love and sexuality in mainstream culture sustain their status by a selective inclusion of more radical views. I highlight the ambivalences that follow from such a selective inclusion, as it functions to support a normative sexual rights discourse by appropriating and de-radicalizing the critical edge in cultural products. As result, I argue, such appropriations delimit possibilities for more subversive expressions to unsettle normativities. As emphasized by queer and feminist scholars, normative understandings of gender and sexuality function as central organizing principles of society, emanating from understandings of acceptable and unacceptable sexual and gendered conduct (Browne & Nash, 2010; Plummer, 2015). Yet, pointing at the double meaning of normativity, Judith Butler emphasize that norms refer to both “the aims and aspirations that [...] give direction to our actions”, and to “the process of normalization” as certain norms, ideas and ideals provide standards for “normal ‘men’ and ‘women’” (Butler, 2004, p. 206). Because of this doubleness, Butler argues, it is crucial to attend both to the ways in which normative understandings of gender and sexuality are institutionalized and naturalized, and to trace the moments where such understandings are disputed and challenged. Here, fantasy has a particularly powerful potential, Butler contends, as it enables us to question “what is real” at the same time as it shows how “new modes of reality [are] instituted” (2004, p. 217). In this article, I am particularly interested in analysing how such challenges to normative regulations are understood and transmitted in broader social/cultural arenas, to analyse the interaction between such understandings and constructions of national identity, in this case, constructions of Sweden as a modern, rational and liberal country. Here, understandings of equality and rights are based on contradictory notions of both emancipation and discipline, both liberty and control, through which a normative discourse around normal and good sexual conduct is maintained and reinforced.
omissions of the more radical expressions in the novel, point attention to the fact that discourses of sexual rights work as both instruments and effects of power (Foucault, 1981). In this case, the lack of critical responses may be conceived in light of particular, historically situated, understandings of sexual rights, in relation to which “other” enactments of sexuality and gender in most cases are conceptualized as something else than articulations of or aspirations for rights or equality. Discourses of sexual rights and of gender equality thus have a certain regulative effect.

1. The 1960s: Sexual democracy

In the 1950s and 1960s, an image of Sweden as a sexually liberated country and of Swedish women as sexually willing was produced internationally. International newspapers wrote articles with headlines such as “Sin & Sweden” (Arnberg, 2009, p. 467), in which birth control, abortion, promiscuity and sexual frivolity was described as indispensable rights in Sweden. These international reactions predated the more heated debates that took place in Sweden during the 1960s, shaped in relation to the political discussions about the pornography legislation that subsequently was taken in 1971 (Arnberg, 2009, p. 475). In this debate, arguments for free abortion, intercourse between friends, and pornography without censorship was given a large exposure in the media (Arnberg, 2009, p. 473). Women’s liberation from sexual norms and from expectations of building a family was emphasized and a clear connection between love, sex and naturalness was made: ideas about heterosexuality as the natural sexuality were produced and links between a natural sexuality and a good pornography were made, developing a utopian vision where “good people lived in a natural and erotically respectful harmony” (Arnberg, 2009, p. 473).

In the late 1960s, a Swedish report titled Sex and Society in Sweden (1967) was published internationally. In the opening lines, the author of the study explained that: “On the road toward sexual democracy, Sweden has made great strides in bringing about a gradual equality between the sexes in politics, education, employment, and civil rights, as well as in social and sexual relations” (Glover & Marklund, 2009, p. 495). In this study, the concept of sexual democracy establishes a connection between sexuality and gender as similarly important tools in the strivings to bring about equality. Thus the construction of Sweden as the land of sin should not be interpreted in opposition to the emergent rational welfare state project, but rather as “an expression of it” (Glover & Marklund, 2009, p. 495).

The emergence of what was described as a progressive discourse around sexual and gender liberation continued to put its imprint on the image of Sweden as a modern and rational country. And the idea of equality established particular values and expectations around normal, healthy and natural lives. Those values implied that citizens not only had the right, but also the duty to live normal lives (Schmauch, 2011). For example, as Ulrika Schmauch describes in an analysis of processes of normalization in the Folkhem, during the emergence of the welfare state in Sweden, the state gave “provisions for the care of single mothers but also introduced policies to ensure that many of them were sterilized so that they would not have more children” (Schmauch, 2011, p. 49). As it turned out, the alleged progressive politics for increased equality—producing the image of Sweden as modern and rational—was composed by contradictory features, combining “emancipation and discipline […] liberty and servitude” (Glover & Marklund, 2009, p. 508); an ambivalent and politically loaded project of social engineering, in which sexuality became a biopolitical tool for shaping processes of normalization.

2. The 1990s: The women friendly society

Being internationally known as a sexually liberated country in the mid-20th century, the dominant image of Sweden as the land of sin in the 1950s and 1960s subsequently shifted to reports about Sweden as a women friendly society towards the late 20th century. With this, the image of Sweden as a modern and rational nation with progressive policies on gender equality and sexuality was successfully reinforced. One of the more-well known examples of a policy that contributed to this image is the Sex Purchase Act that criminalizes people who buy sexual services, launched by the Swedish government January 1st 1999. Analyses of the debate before and after the regulation, show that this decision was the result of a successive change in the perception of prostitution—from being
understood as a result of a commercialization and capitalization of social relations harmful both for women and men, prostitution started to be described as a form of sexual violence during the 1990s, linked to the idea of the gender system in which, as it was explained, men “control women's bodies, sexuality and reproduction” (Dodillet, 2009, p. 427). Intimacy, togetherness and love was described in the debate as the opposite to prostitution, and the gender equality minister at the time explained that the “only socially accepted sexuality is that which shows ‘mutuality, equality and genuine intimacy between two people’” (Kulick, 2005, p. 22). As many queer scholars have emphasized, this view on gender relations and sexuality, led to a demonization of alternative forms of sexualities (Kulick, 2005; Rydström & Tjeder, 2009). With the regulation, a good sexuality that all Swedes were expected to adhere to was officially sanctioned, a sexuality where connections between love and sex and between sex and togetherness was reinforced. As Susanne Dodillet concludes in her analysis of the debate around the legislation: “the argument that prostitution contributes to the oppression of women was based on a normative view on sexuality. ... Sexual practices that differed from the view of sexuality as equal and grounded in feelings [love], was seen as oppressive and had to be stopped” (Dodillet, 2009, p. 341).

Governmental reports from this era explain gender equality and human rights as “values in our country”, based on particular ideas around gender, sexuality and ethnicity, ideas that people are expected to adapt/assimilate to (Carbin, 2010, p. 30). In policy documents, Sweden repeatedly presents itself as a modern and rational society and as a good role-model for others to follow, while other cultures/societies are described as backwards. Indeed, as queer scholar Jens Rydström succinctly summarizes: “Ever since the boldly functionalist Stockholm Exhibition in 1930, Sweden has taken pride in being modern. In interior decorating, in welfare, in women’s or lesbian and gay rights, Sweden has always opted for the modern solution, and Swedes tend to regard their country as “modern,” while they think of other countries as ‘backward’” (Rydström, 2004, p. 273). Or, as the Integration and gender equality ministry in 1999 explains it, in a report presenting their ambitions for the coming decade: “We in Sweden have come a long way compared with other nations, yes, in fact, we are far ahead of the rest of the world. We are glad to share our experiences; we are glad to export our Swedish model for gender equality” (Arora Jonsson 2009, p. 217). Yet, the production of Sweden as a role model was not only directed at those outside of Sweden, but also directed at “outsiders” within Sweden; the migrants. During this era, as a result of the occurrence in Sweden of what has been called honour killings, notions of gender equality and sexual rights were coupled with discourses of “race”/ethnicity, shaping polarizations between “us”/?them”, west/east and Christians/Muslims. Being forced to assimilate to a Swedish national identity, migrants faced specific conditions for their participation in the so called women friendly and gender equal Sweden, as migrant men were constructed as perpetrators and migrant women, in return, constructed as victims of traditional, patriarchal cultures (Alinia, 2011; Carbin, 2010).

During the 1990s, the image of Sweden as a modern and rational country, was strengthened by references to Sweden as a women friendly society and a feminist utopia, distributed among feminists and policy makers within and outside of Sweden, and supported by references to “other” cultures or regions as backward and patriarchal. However, by a reinforcement of the link between sexuality and love, by a steady location of sexuality within a two-some relationship, and by polarizations between “us” (Swedes) and “them” (migrants/Muslims), the efforts to “create normality in welfare institutions supported discriminatory structures by interweaving normative notions of gender, ‘race’/ethnicity and class” (Fahlgren, Johansson, and Muliniari, 2011, p. 12), as well as normative understandings of sexuality, in legislation and policy.

3. The early 2010s: Modern, rational and liberal
In “Thinking sex” (1984), Gayle Rubin discusses the relationship between feminism and sex. Aware that sex is political, filled with “conflicts of interest and political maneuver” (Rubin, 1984/1999, p. 143), Rubin sets out to show how ideas about sex often are imbued with particular values (of normality and naturalness), and specific hierarchies (good vs. bad). These limits, Rubin explains, change over time, and across different cultural contexts, through the inclusion of particular sexual acts, or
alternative hierarchical standards. The legalisation of gay marriages in Sweden in 2009 is an illustrative example of such a change, where same sex sexuality is included within the limits of accepted sexual practices, but where the values and hierarchies surrounding the sexual order remain the same. With this legislation, Sweden confirmed the image of itself not only as a modern and rational country but also a liberal nation. Releasing marriage from formal heteronormative foundations, the legislation has inspired scholars and opinion makers to describe Sweden as a “forerunner” when it comes to liberal family policies (Andersson, 2010) and many celebrated by the legislation. Others, however, critically reviewed the legislation as a demand on the homosexual population to assimilate to heterosexual ideals of marriage, sexuality and love. Understood in the light of other regulations around same sex practices, the state sanctions of homosexual togetherness has been described as going “hand in hand with a more general domestication and control of other forms of same sex sexuality” (Ambjörnsson, 2006, p. 95) through the introduction of other regulations that made it more difficult for gay people to have anonymous sex with each other.

The state interventions around sexual policies in Sweden from the mid-1950s until today can be described as variegated and ambivalent. During this time period, the boundaries surrounding sexual practices have been expanded and certain sexual practices have been included in what Rubin would explain as the normal and good sex, most notably sex in homosexual couples. At the same time, a number of normative values surrounding sexual practices have been reinforced, such as the connection between love and sex in two-some couples, through, among other issues, measures to obstruct for anonymous sexual encounters, non-monogamy or promiscuity (Andersson, 2011). These regulations produce ambivalences, as Anna Adeniji underlines in her analysis of resistance against marriage among women in Sweden: “To live in couples (irrespective if it is a heterosexual or homosexual relationship) is seen both as a sign of a modern relationship, as long as the couple is gender equal, and as a traditional, natural and romantic phenomenon” (Adeniji, 2008, p. 280, emphasis added).

Within this discursive context, the underground comic publishing company Galago published the graphic novel Prins Charles’ känsla [Prince Charles’ feeling], by Strömquist (2010). The graphic novel received a large exposure and positive reviews in the daily press and quickly became extremely popular. Encircling around the question “What is love?” the novel discusses norms around sexuality, love and gender in western culture and history, through humour, irony and satire. Offering an enlightening tour in history, psychology, popular culture, and social theory, the representation of gender, sexuality and history in the novel destabilize the discourses of normality and normativity in sexuality and in intimate relationships that have grown strong in sexual policies in Sweden. The reception of this graphic novel was overwhelmingly positive. In the reviews, the novel is presented as a radical and provocative critique of sex and love, but it is described through readings that confirm dominant discourses around sex, love and gender. As I discuss below, this ambivalence appear to support a more general discourse around sexual rights and gender equality in Sweden, as it takes shape through both emancipation and discipline, both liberty and control.

4. Sex, love, intimate relationships and possession

The graphic novel Prince Charles’ feeling presents intimate relationships in different historical moments of time. In the novel, conventions around coupledom in different epochs of time are presented as power filled, based on context specific norms and values. Covering a range of topics, such as care, abuse, sexual fidelity, the organization of the private sphere, love and consumption, the novel visualizes the social conventions around togetherness as well as norms and values around gender, sex and love. Stylistic figures, such as parallelisms (repetition), contrast, contextual and temporal shifts, detachment, and satire, create a linguistic and contextual double edge that turns the meaning up-side-down: what is said is not meant, and the thought is expressed in an opposite way (Colebrook, 2004, p. 9). This produces a humorous and destabilising representation of femininity and masculinity, of gender relations, sex, love, and intimate relationships. Strömquist alters between the use of ironic figures in illustrations and text, and a narrator that gives sincere advice to her readers, referring to history, social theory and psychology. The novel criticizes the mainstream view on sexual practices and produces an alternative vision, where the reproduction of power relations and
the recuperation of social conventions restricting intimate relationships can be interrupted, resisted and changed, through what is explained in the novel as the practising of love in a limitless community.

The sexual right of possession is a frequently recurrent theme in the novel. This theme is introduced with a sequence where a woman and a man states that they are going to have sex with each other only, and not with anyone else. As it continues, the topic is presented in a more complex way, but the connection between sex and love in our culture remains static:

*Figure 1. Strip 1.*
See Figure 1

Strip 1:

Image 1: The narrator: The American sociologist Randall Collins explains that “sexual right of possession” in our society creates the core of what we mean by “being together.”

Person 1: We are together.

Person 2: That is, we have sex with each other and are not allowed to have sex with anyone else.

Person 1: Yes, that was what I said.

Image 2: The narrator: In former times, the sexual right of possession stretched over a whole life while people nowadays have a series of shorter sexual rights of possession-arrangements. Example of a socially accepted incident in our culture:

Person 1: I slept with someone before you and I became a couple.

Person 2: And?

The narrator: No feelings of anger, hatred, sorrow, reduced self-esteem, oceans of meaninglessness or deep injury.

Image 3: The narrator: Example of socially unaccepted incident in our culture:

Person 1: I slept with someone after we became a couple.

Person 2: What?!

The narrator: Terribly serious feelings of anger, hatred, sorrow, reduced self-esteem, oceans of meaninglessness and deep injury.

Image 4: The narrator: These feelings are products from the society you live in. In Tibet before the Chinese occupation it was for example common to have polyandrous relationships: that is, a woman who married many men, often a number of brothers. The brothers were not jealous of each other.

Image 5: The narrator: Example of socially accepted incident if the brothers Herrey had lived in a polyandrous culture:

Wife: I slept with Richard Herrey and Louis Herrey after we got together.

Per Herrey: And?

Image 6: The narrator: If another person lays claims on the wife, the brothers could be extremely jealous:

Wife: I have slept with Niclas Wahlgren.

The brothers Herrey: Whaat? We feel terribly serious feelings of anger, hatred, sorrow, reduced self-esteem, oceans of meaninglessness... and deep injuries.

Repeating the theme in different scenarios, moving it in and out of context, the sexual right of possession in western culture manifests as an assumption, taken for granted and synonymized with being together, as in Image 1. Through pointing at the arbitrary cultural rules surrounding sex and love,
where people easily accept that their partner had a sexual relationship with someone else before they got together, or, that couples in polyandrous cultures without difficulty accept sexual relationships with others (Images 2 and 4), Strömquist uncovers the connection between sex and love in different contexts and times as a social convention. Equated with love, however, any breach of the sexual right of possession in intimate relationships in our culture creates strong negative feelings. These feelings are “real”, shared, as they are, in the culture, like in Images 3 and 5. The sequence of images however, uses an irony of thought, and the thought is expressed opposite to what is meant. The ordinary cause-and-effect belief that the act of having sex with someone outside the couple causes negative feelings is here loosened up, and the assumption of sexual fidelity within the couple as a social convention, equating sex and love, appears as the cause for the negative feelings (Images 2 and 3).

The graphic novel goes back and forth in history and discusses the changes in conventions around marriage, love, sex and gender roles over the centuries from the antique until today. The turn of events in the early 19th century and the implications of the shift from marriages based on arrangement to marriages based on love are highlighted. This shift, it is explained, involved the establishment of a connection between the sexual right of possession and love—“since”, as the narrator explains “marriage was based upon love—and sex only was allowed within marriage ...” In the absence of (male) privileges to inherit wealth and to be employed, the consequence of this for women in society was, as it is described, that “women’s only commodity became sex.” “Patriarchy”, the narrator continues, “produced in this way a situation where women were forced to create and maintain a prudish culture: through oppressing their own sexuality women got access to the economic assets of the society.” The novel moves forward in history, and touches down in our present day society:

See Figure 2.

Strip 2:

*Image 1:* The narrator: Thus, we have established that an ideal was created on the 19th century that functioned like this:

Person 1: Marriage should be entered on the basis of love.

Person 2: Sex happens inside the marriage.

*Image 2:* The narrator: Today, we have exchanged marriage for “love couples” but most love couples function in exact the same way as being legally married to someone.

Person 1: You become a couple because you are in love.

Person 2: You should not have sex with anyone outside of your love relationship.

*Image 3:* The narrator: The connection between love and sex means that a break against the sexual right of possession also is interpreted as a break against love. If someone says, for example:

Person 1: I have slept with someone else.

The narrator: Then you think:

Person 2: Well, obviously you are not in love with me anymore.

*Image 4:* The narrator: The ideal is that sexual right of possession and love is connected. One gets easily jealous if someone says:

Person 1: I love you but I use to have sex with Conny.
Person 2: (Jealous).

Image 5: The narrator: But one can also get jealous of the reverse scenario:

Person 1: I have sex with you but I love Conny.

Person 2: (Jealous).

Image 6: The narrator: That love is linked with sexual right of possession is also discernible in our language, swarming with expressions that manifest possession in relation to love. For example, on an average afterparty one can hear:
Person 1: I only want to be, be only, be yours (Jakob Hellman)

Person 2: Oh oh la la, I want to have you (Ulf Lundell)

Person 3: This is our fate, I’m yours’ (Jason Mraz)

Person 4: I’ve got you, babe (Sonny & Cher)

Person 5: I want to be yours, Margareta (Sven-Ingvars)

In this strip, the norm of linking love and sex is prosaically declared (Image 1) and demonstrated through the feelings of jealousy that arises when one partner in a love relationship has sex with someone else or vice versa (Images 4 and 5). Through the link between love/sex and possession, in Image 6, a contrast between the seemingly neutral attitude to the idea expressed in earlier strips signal the irony of thought in the sequence as a whole, where the idea expressed appear as opposite to what is meant: manifested through the word “possession”, the link between love and sex uncovers intimate relationships as power filled and conditional practices, and highlights the implicit claims in the connection between love and sex on possession and proprietorship of the ones we love.

Engaging with and destabilising the demands on love relationships and on sexual encounters, the novel, on a general level, questions what we mean by love. While intimate relationships, sex and love, are presented in the novel as regulated through social conventions, an alternative to this is presented in the idea of a “loving friendship” with consequences for the organization of private life: “why do loving couples have to live together?”, for reproduction: “why do loving couples have to have children together?”, and for sexuality: “why do loving couples need to practice sexual right of possession?” In the novel, love relationships are resembled with a private mini-religion, encircled by arbitrary, but context specific conventions, where breach of the customs of relationships engender similar feelings as the feelings created among believers by religious dissidents and convertites. Through clashes between emotionally detached, seemingly rational, accounts of how sex and love is practiced and understood in our culture, and pamphlet like statements such as “there is no rational reason to restrain from sex—sexual right of possession is a ritual”, the novel challenges the rationality and validity of the social conventions around sex and love, and deconstructs cultural norms around masculinity, femininity, sex and love, as they appear arbitrary, absurd and irrational.

As Claire Colebrook points out, one central tendency in irony is its “criticism of knowledge and authority” (2004, p. 112), which is a criticism that appears in Strömquist’s graphic novel through the slide in meaning, what is said is not meant, through repetition, contrast, and shifts of ideals in different contexts and different epochs of time. This criticism, however, once again brings authority back, through the “creation and production of [another] truth” (Colebrook, 2004, p. 112), in Strömquist’s novel presented as the wish to separate sex from love. Implicitly, she argues for polyamorosity, by challenging the habits and conventions through which love and sex is regulated in our society, and defend the idea of love liberated from forms of possession, and the idea of non-exclusive sexual relationships.

5. Reception
In the newspapers and on book blogs on the internet, the graphic novel was received by univocal praise, characterized by tributes paid to the novel and to the artist who was identified in one review as the “probably funniest person in Sweden” (Svensson, 2010). The reviewers’ main characteristic of the novel is that it portrays gender relations and love: that it thematizes “sex roles” (Högström, 2010), examines “what we call love” (Sivac, 2010) and “marriage” (Alesmark, 2010). Some also point to an awareness of power asymmetries, and describe the novel as portraying “how the gender-power-order affects romantic love” (E. Karlsson, 2010). Many find it liberatingly funny (Grelson, 2010). One reviewer especially mentions the comic genre as an apt ideologic forum for feminist ideas and Strömquist’s ability to combine her political message with nuance in style and content is
by the reviewer met with tribute (Jurjaks, 2010). Some reviewers are excessively delighted: “her liberating humour and ability to create visions make me shout with joy” (Grelson, 2010); “Liv Strömquist’s fluoroscopy of love is so remarkably complete that I am sure she is right” (Asarnoj, 2010). Only one is negative throughout the review: “as a result, it is a smart creation but one where neither text nor illustrations seem to get enough space” (E. Karlsson, 2010).

Most of the reviews identify this as a graphic novel where (hierarchical) gender relations and the organization of love through marriage is examined. Only a small number of reviews explicitly mention the critique in the novel against the, as one reviewer explains, “heteromonogamous love norm” (Grelson, 2010). Among the reviewers who identify this theme in the novel, only one meet Strömquist’s critique of the sexual right of possession in a positive way. This reviewer does not specifically mention this particular critique, but implicitly points to it, explaining, that “with a society lack of visions, it is with deep gratitude I read someone who at least venture to indicate that alternatives are possible” (Grelson, 2010). Others make reservations in their otherwise enthusiastic tributes to the novel, interposing that “it is perhaps a little bit politically correct and didactic …” (Högström, 2010), and that “at times, one sense that the author pursues a rather slanted agenda” (Sivac, 2010).

As a cultural expression, feminist comics inhabit a subcultural space in the society and take shape as a more or less radical alternative to dominant culture in style and ideology (Halberstam, 2003, p. 319). As with many other subcultural expressions, feminist comic artists experience a specific form of recognition from mainstream culture. In the case of Strömquist this is visible in the close to concordant praise for Prince Charles’ feeling in the reviews. However, as Halberstam points out in their article about queer subcultures, while the “dominant culture scavengers are usually looking for a story and hoping for that brush with the ‘new’ and the ‘hip’” (2003, p. 318), the interest from mainstream culture also involve the risk that the subculture gets “robbed of its salient features” (2003, p. 317). Indeed, progressive representations are vulnerable to appropriation (Imre, 2008), as illuminated by the reception to Strömquist’s graphic novel. In the reception of the novel, a gap is opened up between the unified praise for the less radical features in the novel, such as its critique of power asymmetrical gender relations or the influence of hierarchical gender relations on love relationships while the novel’s more radical ideas, its suggestion to liberate sexual practises from love and two-some relationships for example, are met with silence. Some of the reviews takes an explicit distance against these ideas in the novel, such as, for example, its critique of the sexual right of possession in terms of love as ownership or its appeal for a non-exclusive sexual relationships: “Despite that Liv Strömquist says that polyamorous relationships are very reasonable, I will leave that to my next life” (J. Karlsson, 2010). The main part of the reviews, though, does not mention these themes in the novel. In contrast, they highlight the less normatively challenging ideas, such as its critique of power asymmetrical gender relations: “All who have ever thought about why it is a criteria for higher salary to have a dick should read Liv’s album” (J. Karlsson, 2010); “(the album thematizes) the tedious relationship patterns that automatically emerge among heterosexual couples” (Sivac, 2010); “[…] the album is intended as an analysis of how the gendered power order affects romantic love” (J. Karlsson, 2010).

Having been a part of the mainstream social debate and governmental policies in Sweden for more than three decades, a critique of the power asymmetries in gender relations cannot be understood as radical in a Swedish context, rather the contrary, repeating as it does a dual sex model and a dominant idea of “equality” in intimate relationships (read: sexual relationships based on love), echoing the strivings for sexual democracy and gender equality from the mid-1960s and late 1990s, discussed in the first section of this article. Furthermore, by explaining that the novel focuses on “romantic love”, “coupledom” or “marriage”, the reviews avoid rendering recognition to the novel’s representation of the practice of getting married as antiquated and dated to the 19th century, they obscure the novel’s insistence that coupledom and discourses about romantic love today function in the same way as marriages did in the 19th century, and they keep away from the critique in the novel of the sexual right of possession among love couples of today. Such omissions visualizes the practice of appropriation where mainstream culture acknowledges, but transforms, the subcultural critique so that it confirms the dominant discourse instead of destabilizing it. By so doing,
mainstream culture appears as similarly open minded and radical as the graphic novel, but does that without sharing its most salient feature, the critique of the sexual right of possession.

6. Normativity and equal rights
The reception of Liv Strömquist’s graphic novel and its radical critique of notions of sexual rights and gender equality in Sweden, provides an illuminative example of the ways in which established discourses of rights and equality sustain their dominance by a selective inclusion of more radical cultural/political ideas. In the reception of the novel, Strömquist’s insistence on non-exclusive sexual relationships is, roughly, transformed to a critique of gendered power relations. By celebrating the graphic novel, the reviews appear to be as radical as the graphic novel, meanwhile they confirm the current mainstream view on love and sex, in which mutuality and equality in love and sexual relationships is emphasized. In the reviews, this is done through their emphasis on the critique in the novel of asymmetrical power relations between women and men, and their concomitant neglect of the novel’s more radical features that question the sexual right of possession. The ambivalence that is produced through such an appropriation, I suggest, should be understood in relation to the ambivalence inherent in the more general production of Sweden as a modern, rational and liberal nation, where sexuality and gender, equality and rights are used as political tools to support and reinforce processes of normalization. From the 1950s and until today, similar ambivalences are present in policies surrounding sex in Sweden, as that which is produced as a “normal” and “good” sexual practice is included/celebrated/acknowledged, while ideas of “bad”, “abnormal”, or “unnatural” sexual practices, silence/ regulate/punish other forms of sexual conduct (Walters, 2012). The constraint of power inherent in this construction is masked, as it appears “neutral, taken for granted”, but simultaneously legitimize various kinds of violence, discrimination and oppression (Fahlgren et al., 2011, p. 12).

The long-term ambitions by the Swedish state to bring about equality in economical, social and sexual relations, have created a progressive image of Sweden as having successful equal rights policies. Importantly, during this epoch, women and gay, lesbian and bisexual people have experienced an increased sexual freedom. Along with this, though, the forms through which sexual practices are controlled and disciplined have also been reinforced. Throughout the period studied in this article, the ambitions to achieve equality in sexual and gender relations have enabled certain subjects and political projects to emerge, such as heterosexual women and gay, lesbian and bisexual people, or political projects to provide legal protection for certain forms of sexual conduct (same sex marriages for example). Other subjects, such as poor and migrant women or sex buyers, have been punished, victimized or criminalized, and other political projects, such as polyamorosity or anonymous sexual encounters, have been seen as illegitimate. This illuminates how equality and rights, as universal concepts, render their meaning in particular, situated contexts. In such contexts, norms about acceptable sexual conduct or gendered subjectivity become attached to notions of equality and rights, as particular social, historical and political conditions justify certain notions of equality and rights as legitimate and true (Foucault, 1980, 1981).

7. Radical political democracy
Inspired by the recent interest in queer theory for geographies of sexuality, this article has engaged in a broader social/cultural critique of how notions of sexuality in Sweden intersect with notions of gender, “race”/ethnicity, and national identity. I have traced the historically variegated origins of present-day discourses of sexual rights and gender equality. I have illuminated the ways in which gendered subjectivities and sexual practices deemed unequal or unjust, such as poor or migrant women, or anomalous or paid sex, have been managed in various ways, by sterilizations, criminalization, or victimization. I have shown how more or less violent constructions of normality during this period of time have shaped diverse, but regulative, discourses around normal and good forms of sexual and gendered conduct. Paying attention to this regulative effect in discourses of sexual rights and gender equality, I have demonstrated that more radical articulations of sexuality and togetherness are only selectively included in mainstream culture, and I have argued that such a selective inclusion functions as a central element in the stabilization of dominant discourses. In the course of
this analysis, I have also paid attention to the shifts and continuities in understandings of sexual rights and gender equality by highlighting the interplay between variegated discourses of good, normal and healthy sex and emergent constructions of modernity, rationality and liberty. I have emphasized the ambivalent character in both, as they are based on contradictory notions of both emancipation and discipline, both liberty and control, and I have shown how such ambivalent discourses shape processes of normalization, enabling certain subjects and political projects to appear and receive protection, while delegitimating and punishing others.

The solution to these dilemmas, according to Judith Butler, would be to de-link social norms from processes of normalization and from racial and ethnic assimilation. She suggests instead the need to understand norms as “collective sites of continuous political labour” (Butler, 2004, p. 231). As I have demonstrated in this article, there is a plethora of opportunities for such political labour in Sweden, as this nation proudly has taken on the duty of claiming a position of global superiority and of being a forerunner in gender equality and sexual rights. Such constructions of normality and global superiority are quite far away from what equality and rights ideally could mean. Yet, I would suggest that ambitions to pinpoint the failures or successes of such projects run a risk of themselves contributing to constructing new differentiations of normality/abnormality. Rather, I would like to emphasise the need for feminist and queer positionings in relation to the present production of allegedly universal discourses of sexual and women’s rights. In such a political project, following Butler’s appeal for a radical political democracy, norms could be a starting point for a collective and critical engagement with processes of normalization and histories of exclusion, taking shape not as standards of normality but as “collective assembly points” for continuous political action (Butler, 2006, p. 228).

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Notes
1. The reviews of the novel appear in a variety of publication channels, such as national and local newspapers, daily press and tabloids, print and online media, as well as established newspapers and alternative publication channels (online blog). I made a search at Mediearkivet (Media Archive), a database that archives Swedish newspaper articles, to find all reviews that had been written about this graphic novel. They were published over a three-month period (August, September and October) and I collected the reviews directly through the websites of the newspapers and the blog. Since the year of its publication, the graphic novel has been rewritten as a theatre performance and these performances have also been reviewed in the daily press. In this article, however, I have limited my analysis to study only the reviews of the graphic novel.
2. Since all reviews took a similar stance in their understandings of sexuality and love, my analysis cannot reveal any information about the potentials or limitations in different publication channels, of more radical readings. Thus, rather than studying a distinct sphere of media and publishing, my analysis sheds light on the dynamics of readings (dominant/subversive) in a wider cultural/societal arena.
3. Although the graphic novel adheres to academic customs by the inclusion source literature for example, page numbers are missing in the graphic novel, so I cannot give full references to the pages where the strips analyzed appear.
4. All quotes from the graphic novel are translated by me.
5. The brothers Richard, Louis and Per Herrey are artists, famous for winning the Eurovision Song Contest in 1984. Niclas Wahlgren is a famous artist in Sweden. As with the brothers Herrey, Niclas Wahlgren is known as well-behaving, often described as “a mother’s dream.”
6. The names of these persons (with the exception for Jason Mraz and Sonny & Cher) relate to famous musical artists in Sweden, and in their cues, they repeat a line from the chorus of well-known songs.
7. For a related discussion based in a Finnish context, see Kolehmainen (2012, p. 992).
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