

Article

## Pinkwashing Policies or Insider Activism? Allyship in the LGBTIQ+ Governance–Activism Nexus

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### Abstract

While there has been an increase in the rights and visibility of LGBTIQ+ people in (most) European countries, critiques of what is denounced as instrumentalization by public policies of LGBTIQ+ issues have also developed. In this context, one can ask how to qualify the strengthened relationships between governance and activism. In this article, I propose to explore the paradoxical articulation of the multiple sites from where the cause support can be enacted. Drawing on a Geneva-based ethnographic research project, I use the concept of governance–activism nexus to reflect on the liminal position of public officials in charge of implementing equality agendas. Troubling further the insider–outsider binary divide, I argue that they act towards a discrete queering of municipal governance from the inside, through the practice of allyship in solidarity. In so doing, this article offers future research perspectives for the study of urban/regional LGBTIQ+ activism and politics, while allowing us to question our own position as critical or activist researchers in the field of feminist and queer geographies.

### Keywords

allyship; equality; Geneva; insider activism; pinkwashing; public policies; queer space

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

LGBTIQ+ urban movements have been extensively studied for their claims for legal and policy changes. Hegemonic representations have traditionally framed them as radical and authentic in contrast to institutional politics. While there has been an increase in the rights and visibility of LGBTIQ+ people in (most) European countries, critiques of what is denounced as instrumentalization by public policies of LGBTIQ+ issues have also developed. In this context, one can ask how to qualify the “interface between LGBT activists and the local state” (Podmore, 2013, p. 265), and whether these strengthened relationships work towards a more inclusive planning, or whether it serves as a site for the implementation of normalising policies. In this article, I propose a nuanced analysis of the fluid forms of coalitions and struggles at stake when it comes to the production of a more liveable city for all. I do so through an ethnographic research that accounts for the voices of pub-

lic officials in charge of implementing equality agendas. I focus on the entanglement of municipal and cantonal levels of governance in Geneva, Switzerland (the latter referring to the largest administrative subdivision of the Swiss Federal State, responsible for the administration of its own territory in parallel to decisions taken at federal level. In the case of Geneva, the Canton is also referred to as the Republic and State of Geneva). This leads me to question whether or not the engagement of individuals within public institutions that support equality agendas qualifies as a form of activism. I propose to explore the paradoxical articulation of the multiple sites from where the cause support can be enacted. Relying on the concept of the governance–activism nexus, I examine how individual experiences allow for a discrete queering of municipal governance from the inside, through the practice of allyship in solidarity. In so doing, this article contributes to the recent discussions in geographies of sexualities and urban planning that seek to explore the complex relationship between LGBTIQ+ collectives

and public authorities by destabilising an assumed binary divide (see, e.g., Browne & Bakshi, 2013, 2016; Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2017; Hutta, 2010; Podmore, 2013). It aims hence to extend inquiry beyond the prominent research frame that contrasts pinkwashing policies and authentic radical activism, while allowing us to question our own position as critical or activist researchers in the field of feminist and queer geographies.

I begin this article by locating my research within geographies of sexualities around issues of LGBTIQ+ activism in the social and political context of growing LGBTIQ+ rights. I then present the specificities of the case study, before presenting my methodological approach. Finally, I weave the specificities of the local context together with the voices of the interviewees to account for the liminal position occupied by public officials in charge of equality issues. This allows me to offer future research perspectives for the study of urban/regional LGBTIQ+ activism and politics and queer possibilities at more localised scales.

## 2. Navigating the Shifting Landscapes of Equality Through Activism

With the increase of LGBTIQ+ rights, most parts of the Western world qualify as “equalities landscapes” (Podmore, 2013). In the European context, LGBTIQ+ rights have been integrated as part of the democratic values of a “rainbow Europe” (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2014). This advance in LGBTIQ+ recognition and visibility is not unambiguous though, as it has strongly affected LGBTIQ+ social movements. LGBTIQ+ activism—as “political actions that seek to contest societal hetero—and cisnormativities, advocate for legal and policy changes, and create spaces for LGBTIQ+ people” (Podmore & Bain, 2019, p. 43)—have increased from the late 1960s onwards in the context of sexual liberation and associated identity claims. Their spatial dimension helps tackling power relations by pursuing the transformation of “physical, social, cultural and symbolic space” (Misgav, 2015, p. 1211). As such, the gay neighbourhood, as both an iconic location of freedom for “gender outlaws” (Namaste, 1996) and a place of reterritorialization from the margins, has been considered as a key site of community social formation and political organisation (Blidon, 2011; Brown, 2015). While providing a space of refuge for some, the gay neighbourhood has nevertheless overlooked its exclusionary dynamic towards others. Through their sexual citizenship (Bell & Binnie, 2000; Richardson, 2018), wealthy white (cis-)males subjects are hence raised as a successful model of assimilation—the “new homonormativity” (Duggan, 2002)—referring to a “process of social, legal, and political change” (Brown, 2009, p. 1496) that is associated with neoliberal consumption (Bell & Binnie, 2004) and (heteronormative) family values (Volpp, 2017). This normalising of “(some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states” (Puar, 2013, p. 337) has been criti-

cised for its collusion with homonationalist politics as it reduces reality to a simplistic picture that circumvents power relations (Ritchie, 2015) and further eludes other forms of queerness (Duplan, 2021). Homonationalism, as “dynamic binary processes of inclusion and exclusion” (Misgav & Hartal, 2019, p. 11), ignores the intersectional multiplicity of queer lives and positionalities (Puar, 2007). Moreover, homonationalism resonates pinkwashing (Schulman, 2012), consequently depicting an Other who is deemed to be intolerant, undemocratic, and illiberal (Hartal, 2015). This justifies violent policies towards the Others—be they subjects or countries (Haritaworn, 2010; Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2018; Manalansan, 2005). Attention should be kept however on the place-based politics of the formation of homonationalism, to avoid universalising and to reserve the frame of analysis for state action only (Schotten, 2016).

Finally, the central locus of the “gayborhood” (Doan, 2015; Misgav & Hartal, 2019) has reduced LGBTIQ+ activism and identities to the urban, a bias which has been criticised as “metronormative” (Halberstam, 2005). The growing equalities landscapes have also resulted to a shift in activism that goes with the institutionalisation and professionalisation within social movements. While the emancipatory potential of queer has been partially domesticated (Warner, 1999), changes implemented in response to legislative transformation in LGBTIQ+ rights have nevertheless led to the emergence of new spatialities, alliances, and forms of activism (D’Emilio, 2006). Contesting the bureaucratically-planned policies of the neoliberal city, radical queer (urban) activism is thus posed as the authentic one that listens to queer needs (Johnston, 2017). This binary opposition is however not always clear. Browne and Bakshi (2013) argue for a “politics of ordinariness” that undoes representations of assimilation and depoliticization to account for LGBT activists’ experiences who have been integrated within Brighton’s local state institutions. In the case of funded LGBT centres in Israel, Hartal (2015) exposes how homonationalism involves dual politics, which are constantly (re)negotiated in relation to a specific time and space. Misgav (2015) maps the power relations at play in Tel-Aviv Gay-Center that enable discreet forms of queer radicality while channelling them into normative frames. In the case of the Brazilian LGBT movement, Hutta (2010) accounts for the articulation of neoliberal institutions and dissident activism, while Balzer and Hutta (2014), outlining the emergence of TransGender Europe, call for thinking further its dual politics by thinking through transversality.

Adding to these studies that search to complicate this divide, I call hence upon our responsibility, as critical or activist researchers, to further trouble this boundary-making process between homonormative/pinkwashing public policies and authentic radical activism. I propose to explore this tension through the investigation of the governance–activism nexus. The concept of nexus-politics (Flinders & Wood, 2018) accounts for the

connection of alternative forms of political participation with conventional politics. This results in a strategy of nexus politics, as the result of relationships that can either be grounded in antagonism, or seeking resolution and cooperation. Beyond political participation, the concept of nexus allows for the mapping of dilemmas, tensions, and opportunities that stem from the relationship between two spheres that are not otherwise connected. The governance–activism nexus works hence as a conceptual tool to expose the hinges and troubles manifested by the power relations at play over activists and institution relationships. Focusing on the institutional side of the nexus, I consider the existence of insider activists (Browne & Bakshi, 2013) as activists who work for statutory services. Located in a bridging position that goes beyond the state/no-state divide, I argue that they facilitate the connectiveness of the nexus through practice of allyship. While allyship can be broadly defined as the act of combating LGBTIQ+ discriminations and challenging heteronormativity from a straight position, I propose to embrace allyship as an ongoing critical practice (Nixon, 2019) that accounts for the power relations at stake within a supposedly homogeneous microcosm, in this case, the LGBTIQ+ community. This furthermore allows for self-reflection on one’s own privilege within the community, as an act of solidarity with those whose voices are not accounted for (McKenzie, 2014). In so doing, I call for a deepening of what activism encompasses, blurring the insider–outsider boundaries and aiming to open up new paths in thinking about everyday engagement as a feminist practice of solidarity.

### 3. An Ethnographic Approach to Geneva Public Institutions

This article draws on ongoing ethnographic research in Geneva. While Geneva is globally touted as the international capital of peace, the Swiss context regarding LGBTIQ+ rights remains quite conservative. The Swiss gay movement only emerged in the late 1970s to speak out against the still-enforced policies that criminalised homosexuality (Delessert, 2012). In Romandie, the French-speaking area of Switzerland, community collectives tentatively organised from the 1980s, aiming to provide a dedicated space for the community (Roca I Escoda, 2013). Their contribution to public policymaking was then increased by the AIDS crisis, which acted as a trigger for a shift “from acting against the system” to “acting within the system” (Roca I Escoda, 2013, pp. 80–81). Since the late 1990s, European institutions have been adopting a normative framework that advances the visibility of LGBTIQ+ issues by introducing them to the legal framework of member states. This equality climate has definitively gained traction in activism in Switzerland, which has remained intertwined in European activists’ networks despite being formally outside the European Union. However, it was not until July 2021, after years of community activism, that same-sex marriage became

legal in Switzerland. Furthermore, while the extension of the criminal norm (*Art. 261 bis*) allowed the condemnation of homophobia as an act of incitement to hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation, it ignored the specificity of trans issues, leaving transphobic violence unrecognised (see also Duplan, 2022). As the Swiss system allows the cantons and municipalities specific competencies, Geneva appears at both levels quite progressive. In 2002, long before the federal law on same-sex marriage, the State of Geneva passed a law on same-sex partnership (Roca I Escoda, 2010). The Office for the Promotion of Equality and the Prevention of Violence, which aims to promote equality “regardless of sex, sexual orientation and gender identity” (République et canton de Genève, n.d.), counts a subcommittee dedicated to LGBTIQ+ issues that brings together representatives from various administrative bodies and community collectives several times a year. At the municipal level, a dedicated LGBTIQ+ position has been designated at the request of the community, which is part of an overall radical activist milieu in Geneva (Pattaroni, 2020). The position was founded after a foundational meeting referred to as “les Assises,” with the political support of a left-wing elected representative who stood for years for gender and LGBTIQ+ equality. Finally, a dedicated LGBTIQ+ strategy, which is planned to run over the period 2020–2030, has been designed through seven axes. It addresses the need for an intersectional approach to protect those who are framed as vulnerable LGBTIQ+ demographics, such as women, the elderly, disabled, and trans people. In addition to combatting discrimination and violence, and equal access to municipal services, particular attention is given to enhancing visibility and disseminating queer culture and memory. Overall, LGBTIQ+ Geneva politics encompass a wide range of actions in various sectors, including health, culture, youth, and education. Such actions include the funding of one-off events or community collectives, awareness campaigns, and training, e.g., internal training within institutional services, such as the civil registry services or the police.

The data used in this article stem from a research project that focuses on the claiming of space and citizenship for sexual and gender minorities. I analysed data collected during ethnographic fieldwork within the LGBTIQ+ community, along with observations during events organised in public spaces by both community collectives and public action. I also observed open and internal institutional meetings and completed a document analysis of meeting minutes, brochures, reports, and institutional websites. I choose here to draw more specifically on semi-structured interviews with public officials and selected elected representatives from both the City and the State of Geneva, conducted from February to October 2022. While all public officials agreed to be interviewed, I chose to anonymise my data because the Geneva microcosmos is quite small. Interviewees are therefore referred by letters and their gender kept as neutral. Interviewees A, B, and C work at the municipal

level while D and E work as the cantonal level. In this article, I consider the tension that emerges from the strong dynamism of the two parts of the governance–activism nexus along with the critique of LGBTIQ+ policies that are denounced as pinkwashing by (part) of the community collectives. This ignites the question of whether or not the support provided through public action to the community is possibly a flagship of openness and tolerance for the city brand in the context of urban creative neoliberal modes of governance (Duplan, 2021). I examine hence the nature of the engagement of public officials in charge of gender and LGBTIQ+ equality-related issues, along three main roles that emerged from the analysis: the mediator; the advisor, and the lobbyist.

#### **4. From a Community Bricolage to an Institutional Strategy: Public Officials as Mediators**

In this section, I reflect on the importance of the institutional positions dedicated to equality working collaboratively with community collectives. The interviewees strongly acknowledge that their positions rely on the “strong support of the community collectives” (C). They emphasise that this history is reflected in a way of working that draws on the community’s expertise, through an interactive process that is recognised as “ultra-beneficial” (A). Interviewee C develops:

This year we are working on bodies, the body....One of the first recommendations that came out of the session was: beware of the objectification of bodies. So there you have it, we are really in this interactive process. I don’t know if we can call it “participative,” because participation obeys very precise rules, but in any case, there are quite strong exchanges.

In keeping with this collaborative objective, community collectives meet annually with the institutions, during an event described as “a privileged exchange where the associations and the supervisory elected officials really talk about projects that concern the city” (C). This event counts additionally as a space for community collectives both to raise their voices and concerns directly to the institution and to meet and gather with other collectives in a “networking and sharing place” that helps to “keep in touch” (C). While emphasising the importance of enhancing a meeting culture for sharing and knowing, the interviewees strongly underline that this has been developed over years through exploration. Interviewee C refers to this context as “a blank page” or a “greenfield” upon their arrival. They also call for “stop tinkering,” referencing the new LGBTIQ+ strategy of implementing the municipal action plan by consistently consolidating what already exists. Other interviewees indicate that it is time to “move forward” and “provide the different departments with the means they need to achieve the ambitions set out in the strategy” (A). Interviewee E speaks of an “empirical way of working that now needs to be

more systematised.” They say they are tired of this institutional tinkering, having the feeling that their expertise and voice were impeached by institutional structure, and they were kind of wasting their time with no future for the projects and actions they wanted to implement. Interviewee E’s situation is particularly interesting here since they later announce that they are considering quitting their position, an intention justified by their need of a more applied role.

The interviewees highlight how their position rely on serving the community. For instance, when talking about the 2022 equality campaign, which includes fat and queer women bodies, interviewee B describes that they, as the service, collectively privileged the needs and views of the collectives involved over the recommendations of the communication agency in charge of the campaign posters. While positioning themselves as spokespersons for the community collectives, they also have to know the community and local organisations from within. All the people I engaged with have a prior activist or associative background, or define themselves as engaged in some capacity. Most of them have a strong associative career path and C even talks about associative background as a “kind of a prerequisite” to work in a service in charge of gender and LGBTIQ+ equality issues. They underline the importance of being grounded in the local realities of the community and talk about trying at the best “not being above the ground” to better assess the ongoing challenges, needs, and difficulties encountered by the community (C). This local connection gives them legitimacy on both side of the nexus: within the community, in which they appear as a troubled insider, and within the institution, in which they can value their field expertise. It also emphasises the importance of both “activist capital” (Matonti & Poupeau, 2004) and “indigenous capital” (Ripoll & Tissot, 2010) when it comes to remaining connected to the field realities and facilitating proposals for inclusive LGBTIQ+ policies. Moreover, all the public officials I met working with gender equality issues identify as female and identify either as feminist or demonstrate a strong engagement in their previous background, and all those working with LGBTIQ+ issues are part of the community and have previously worked as activists or in nongovernmental organizations. This is illustrative of what is being forged as activist careers, which would deserve more scrutiny in terms of valued capitals (Colussi, 2023). Moreover, it is worth noting that if queerness appears as a criterion to work in a LGBTIQ+ dedicated position, my observations testify to a quite buffed queerness that closely matches homonormativity and hence reflects its dual politics.

What is also emphasised in the interviews is the dimension of expertise, which is defined in two ways. Firstly, it is defined as a knowledge that is acquired and maintained through relationships between collectives and public officials. Secondly, it is presented as a monitoring process that requires the ability to navigate the changing landscape and identify emerging voices in the

community, bringing them in contact with the institutional side of the nexus. Interviewee C explains:

There are also more informal collectives that do not necessarily have access, that are sometimes a little reticent about public administrations, do not always have a good experience of public authorities, either on a personal or collective basis....Can we put ourselves within reach of these people? This also questions our practices a lot...how do we maintain a dialogue with an administration and all its rigidities, so that we are not just in an exchange with associations that have learned to format themselves for administrative dialogue?

Interviewee C smoothly emphasizes that it is important to not only be in dialogue with funded collectives to avoid a possible “sclerosing process.” As such, they position themselves discreetly as a kind of gatekeeper of what they see as possible over-institutionalisation of some collectives and associated drifts. However, this position as grounded front-runner does not rely only on the will of the actors only. It is also strongly articulated with self-positionality. Interviewee C explains how they reach their own limits when going out in an environment which does not correspond to their personal identification. These reflections show public officials engaged in a grounded work that emphasises contact and proximity with the collectives and the community at large. They embrace their role as mediators between collectives and policymakers, emphasising that they work to amplify silenced voices to institutions to improved inclusivity and treatment of the community. As such, they occupy a liminal position known as in-betweenness (Bhabha, 1994). Their voices also show the way in which they present themselves as experts, in the sense that they have the capacity to navigate within the community and to identify the ongoing issues and transformations. Their positionality may however be a barrier for their legitimacy in certain segments of the community, along with their journey towards the institution, denounced as a renunciation of the authentic values of activism. Wearing multiple “hats” hence does not come without personal costs either, as they “can expect to be challenged and critiqued and held accountable” (Browne & Bakshi, 2013, p. 261). With the implementation of an institutional LGBTIQ+ strategy, one may question whether public officials are offering “authentic” support and truly listening to queer people’s and communities’ needs (Duplan, 2021). This involves considering whether public officials are aware of pinkwashing and if they are consequently positioned to work adversely to these possible drifts.

##### **5. City Self-Promotion or Authentic LGBTIQ+ Support? Public Officials as Advisors**

The new institutional guideline related to the LGBTIQ+ strategy is presented as firmly anchored in the continuity

of what previously existed, i.e., “put[ting] the associative expertise at the heart of public policy” (C). At the state level, interviewee E describes the main objective as to discuss the collectives’ needs for effective, targeted and relevant public action. Interviewee D adds that the equality bill was the concrete result of consultative work with field actors, and the current project of mapping LGBTIQ+ violence is strongly grounded in the field. Interviewee C even minimises the role of the institution to privilege the one of the community in making a more inclusive queer city, by presenting Geneva as “more welcoming thanks to its rich network of associations than...to the City of Geneva.” This is also present when they refer to the need for cultural change within the institution to make public officers understand that political competencies strongly rely on collectives’ expertise. The conception, promotion, and implementation of a strategy labelled LGBTIQ+ also raises question about the possible discriminatory effects engendered by keeping apart LGBTIQ+ issues. While some interviewees argue for services and laws specifically dedicated to LGBTIQ+ persons, others stressed the need for a more transversal approach. Interviewee B refers to how important it is “that there is one person in charge of each theme, because this guarantees that the issues specific to each theme can be developed, and that the common issues can be worked on together.” Interviewee E clarifies that “the political challenge is to centralise a law at the cantonal level, rather than adding to the various existing laws so that people who feel they are victims are recognised.” In contrast, interviewee C mentions that the “LGBT strategy aims at transversal inclusion,” meaning that all city services should individually address LGBTIQ+ needs. While divergent, these viewpoints are not in opposition, but rather point out the complementarity of perspectives and the work towards “reassembling of established differences” (Hutta, 2010, p. 157).

The vigilance towards possible political drifts in LGBTIQ+ support is very present in the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Lesbophobia and Transphobia campaign that takes place in the public city space. Interviewee A explains that the campaign is built *with* and *for* a community audience, while also raising the awareness of the general public. For them, the first challenge is that the general public must be addressed by the campaign in a way that does not produce “additional violence for those concerned,” e.g., not representing pictures that victimize participants or reproduce harmful tropes. Interviewee A underlines that this fragile balance is difficult to maintain. They also insist that the role of representing LGBTIQ+ people in public space involves normalising models for the younger audience. They add that the campaign works as a claiming of public space for the community, “given that the public space is not neutral and predominantly cis hetero.” A’s assertion that such campaigns “make eyes that don’t usually see these things see them” underlines how this works as a queering of the public space. Interviewee A also asserts how important it is for the city to position itself as a supporter



of LGBTIQ+ cause, while accompanying the campaign with a dedicated programme conceived with community collectives, to prevent pinkwashing. What counts for A is:

To put forward values and say to the general public: “The city, as a public institution, supports the rights of LGBTIQ+ people. It is against discrimination against these communities....” That’s it, to really make [its position] visible. If there is really this work of collaboration, of joint consultation, really this connection with the associations....I think that’s what makes it possible to...not fall into simple self-promotion, with a big rainbow flag, you know.

For them, the campaign aims to raise awareness while allowing members of the community to feel represented and supported. The meaning of the term pinkwashing for public officials differs slightly from its academic use. By denying that they are working towards pinkwashing policies, they refer more to policies that would instrumentalise LGBTIQ+ lives to promote the city’s gayfriendly image in line with supposed values of openness and tolerance, than to explicitly portraying of an illiberal and undemocratic Other. The case of Switzerland deserves hence a specific attention due to its regional location on the fringes of the European Union which means that it has to be both accepted and distinguished. The main argument put forward to prevent pinkwashing is the objective of inclusiveness: interviewee C emphasizes the need to “welcome the whole population” as “the motto” that guides the city’s action and the need for the city “to adapt [its] offer to be inclusive of all specificities.” This view, which is grounded in the everyday, relates well to feminist practices and may be a line of inquiry to keep in mind when attempting to assess how public action is performed and produced by public officials on a daily basis. Moreover, it allows for the consideration of whether public action is truly oriented towards everyday people, rather than towards global talents and transnational capital. As Geneva is part of the Rainbow Cities Network, one could oppose that such actions could be used to internationally spread a LGBTIQ+-friendly image of the city. Interviewee C strongly defends themselves from this viewpoint:

This is something we questioned a lot, especially at the beginning of the Rainbow Cities, where there was a fear that this “label,” in inverted commas—the membership of the network—would be used as a marketing tool for the city...and that in the end the municipal action would be limited to that, just because we would be marketing to foreigners only, and that the local population would not be helped at all. This is really a concern we have.

Interviewee C also points that the city favours the network as a good-practice exchange network rather than a label of promotion. Finally, while the city is publicly

encouraging its support to the cause, it is also capable of more discrete actions, for instance when it comes to the funding of community collectives’ project. They explain that while it is supposedly mandatory to include the city logo, the city has allowed its exclusion for some funded events, acknowledging the possible tensions that city funding might engender for some collectives.

Public officials emphasise a bottom-up approach to public action that prioritises the everyday and the local, rather than the international and the external image, which then prevents from being labelled as pinkwashing. They also outline their role on the institutional side of the nexus as an attempt to integrate new ways of thinking, which appears to be crucial when it comes to the implementation of new laws or policies. As mentioned by interviewee D, it is not because a law finally exists that it is applied; while a law is an achievement, it must still be actualised. They explain that “it is also a question of training and raising the awareness of magistrates or lawyers who must apply or refer to this law so that it is really used to its full potential.” The dedicated public officials are consequently required to advise the magistrates or boards, at both the municipal and the cantonal levels, to make relevant public policies that support the LGBTIQ+ community, as well as to educate internal public officials. Interviewee C highlights this at the municipal level, explaining that it became quickly apparent that their role went beyond supporting the collectives to include improving the internal functioning of the institution. They explain how the integration of queer issues has switched, over one decade, from fighting against overt discrimination, such as queer assaults, to considering how to implement queer-specific needs to create more inclusive work environments and better public reception. Interviewee B sees that “one of the big challenges is also to go...and work with the services and get them to integrate these issues, to provide them with advice when they are ready to accept the advice, or the...suggestions. And then to build projects with these services which are intended for the population.”

This responsibility to raise awareness is presented as a step-by-step process, where they must wait for the people and services to be ready. This discreet position is supported by recent legislative changes inside and outside Switzerland, as “an evolution in society’s sensitivity that also goes hand in hand with political and media sensitivity, and which means that these subjects are increasingly discussed” (D). All of this demonstrates the internal work that is done to implement laws and policies and raise awareness across all institutional services for LGBTIQ+ issues. Although it may take time for their expertise to be recognised outside equality-labelled services, public officials in charge of these questions are experts who draw on their grounded knowledge and ongoing contact with the communities. Although they seem unquestionably convinced of their action, the scope of their analysis remains difficult to assess. Deeply embodying their position, they express a flawless

professional performance in the service of an institution that is nevertheless inserted in a rainbow Europe subverted by homonormative neoliberal logics. In this, they bear witness to the dual dynamics of homonationalist policies that normatively orient the axes of governance while continuing to offer contextual possibilities of subversion (Hartal, 2015; Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2017, 2018).

## 6. Insider Activists or Agents of New Neoliberal Governance? Public Officials as Undercover Lobbyists

The research participants demonstrate how they cultivate a patient and discrete work from within, with the aim of transforming the institution. Their words emphasise their commitment in a way that articulates with their personal convictions and values. For example, interviewee B evaluates that “it was a wish to be able to converge my personal commitments and...my professional career.” Furthermore, the manner in which they speak denotes both their identification to the institution and the collective work that is done within the institution. For example, many of them refer to the structure they work for as their place, using “we” and “at our place” throughout their discussions. This work involves permeating the institution and creating change from within through a kind of uncover mode. Interviewee C talks about “a work of small hands in the shadows” that is done at municipal level. They also underline how they have to remind people working in various institutional services that they rely on the expertise of the community collectives. Interviewee C highlights that there is a crucial need for change in institutional culture, which “is still marked by a top down mentality.” Discretely changing the culture of an institution from within is also described by interviewee D, who explains how the service they run succeeded in adding LGBTIQ+ related issues to the conference of equality delegates. This involved bending the initial aim of the conference in the absence of a network and budget that were specifically dedicated to LGBTIQ+ issues. While this illustrates the flexibility that delegates have, it also shows how they use this scope for action without proper institutional direction to align their mission with what they identify as priority issues. Public officials engage hence in a form of internal lobbying. Interviewee B convenes the metaphor of the Trojan horse to describe their work:

We were doing somewhat invisible work to get them (municipal services) on projects. We often start with awareness-raising projects. We say to them, “Oh, we have this project, don’t you want to collaborate?” And then we say, “Oh, well...the results...it would be nice to ask this and that as questions...What if we continue?” And then...[laughs] And then, little by little, we manage to set up programmes, or more structured actions actually. And often it starts with...a little Trojan horse that we...[laughs] that we push forward, like this.

This demonstrates that the research informants are aware of their liminal positions. Furthermore, it shows that they must use many tactics to advance political issues in the face of multiple boundaries. One of the biggest challenges pointed is the possibility of political switches that can occur with legislative changes. The interviewees described that processes of validation, written decisions, and budget guarantees are imperative to achieve long-term institutional transformation and change the institutional culture. Relying on their own commitment to the cause prevents thus public officials from simply being positioned as working agents of the neoliberal governance. When it comes to whether or not they identify as activist, or how they define their way of acting as such, responses vary. Interviewee A exposes how they split their life in two according to geographical area. They continue to be part of the activist milieu in the geographical area they live, which is out of the Geneva State, and stick to their representational role as part of an institution when at work:

There is always a bit of tension, because when you have a job like that, well, you have the institutional hat, you have...you have to put aside your activist hat...I think maybe that [not living in Geneva] can help because I am perhaps less present directly in...the associative milieu here, or the festive and activist spheres. So here I’m mainly seen, perhaps, as the City of Geneva....And I can perhaps also have this slightly more activist life [laughs] in [the place where they live].

Interviewee B argues for a role that clearly refers to activism, asserting that the term should be avoided when talking within the institution:

We’ll try not to use this term [activist] too much so that it won’t be misinterpreted or turned around, but I think there’s an activist dimension. There’s clearly a desire to transform and...Well, there’s an idea of transforming institutions too. It’s not just a question of “we’ll do a few projects and then we’ll have fulfilled our role,” but of “how do we get the...the relationships to change?”....Power relationships are also internal, they are external, they are at the individual level, they are at the collective, systemic level, well....I think that this is also a bit of the vocation of this service, eh....Even if perhaps not everyone realises it....[laughs] What we are trying to do under the radar.

Finally, convening another register of action, interviewee C firmly contests the possibility that one can be an activist while working in such a role. At the same time, their positions themselves as actor of change in relation to LGBTIQ+ issues, which can correspond to a certain definition of activism:

On the other hand, my work is really built as...an actor of change. The idea is obviously to make the

municipal administration progress in these areas, towards better things, towards this inclusion, towards more equality, equity....So....In that sense, it can be seen as activism, but it's not activism, actually. What I'm trying to get across is that it's part of the job. It's part of the roles and responsibilities of municipal governments to deal with these issues. So I voluntarily withdraw from activism actually, saying to myself: "But I'm not activist, I'm trying to think with you and help you to do your job, in fact, and to respond to...your responsibilities." And try to identify them and see the demands for action, and...but in fact it's always from an institutional perspective. It's never....It's never....For the "activism," in quotes.

Interviewee C points to the possible drifts that might be opened when one defines himself as an activist within the institution. He insists that the term activist should be kept away from the institutional sphere, to prevent it from being empty of its political and radical meaning:

And also because I need activists. I need to have people in front of me or next to me or with me who come and poke the institution and say: "Yes, that's very good, but what are you doing concretely?" ...Everyone has their own role. There are things you can't do when you're out, and things you can't do when you're in. But you can do other things. So there you go. That's...really what you have to...balance it all out. So afterwards, I try to push the wheel of change.

This empirical data clearly communicates the personal engagement of public officials in their institutional mission of supporting LGBTIQ+ communities. Beyond the interviews, this is also visible in their desire to take part in the research project, their interest in the research time frame and the future findings, and their availability. The role of a public official may thus be considered as a form of insider activism that allows individuals with strong personal convictions to actively facilitate societal and institutional change from within. However, as they attempt to reflect on their own privileges within the queer community, thanks to their position on the governance side of the nexus, I suggest that they may be described as "critical allies" (Nixon, 2019), who "help clear the noise that gets in the way of coalitional building rather than creating more of it" (Oswin, 2020, p. 14). This heuristic distinction also helps to retain the radical disruptive potential that the term activism carries with it, thereby offering potential future avenues of action for more liveable spaces for all.

## 7. Embracing the LGBTIQ+ Cause Field Through the Practice of Allyship

In a context where the spectre of pinkwashing is never far away, I have shown that public officials in charge of equality issues in Geneva consider their work by reflecting on

their previous activist paths and engaging in grounded collaborative work both with community collectives and within the institution. The main findings illustrate the ongoing dialogue between activist collectives and public officials that join their forces together to increase the visibility of queer lives and concerns, and improve access to public spaces and services for those whose gender or sexual orientation might still be considered as an impediment. They also show the shadow work of those committed persons who infiltrate the institutional sphere with the goal of institutional change. Raising the voice of public officials sheds light on how public action is driven on a daily basis from the perspective of those in charge of its implementation. It also elucidates nuances in the opposition between authentic radical activism, as the exclusive practice of community collectives, and pinkwashing policies, as the assumed strategy of public action and actors.

Reflecting on everyday practices of action from within institutions helps moving beyond the fruitless insider–outsider divide. This prevents the simplistic reduction of those public officials to agents of neoliberal ideology by accounting for the ways homonormative and homonationalist politics are constantly reconfigured for the need of the cause (Hartal & Sasson-Levy, 2018). Moreover, it connects those practices to other existing forms of action that are more easily referred to as activism. It is through everyday practice of engagement within any institution, including academia, that we can collectively support the creation of safer queer spaces for marginalised segments of the community, so that "we might stop wasting time and finally work together to get to where we need to go" (Oswin, 2020, p. 14). I argue hence for accounting for an assemblage of practices that create new constellations. This will help thinking further together both sides of the governance–activism nexus as a shared LGBTIQ+ "cause field" (Bereni, 2021), allowing for a deeper exploration of the fragmented and often conflictual spatialities of collective action. In so doing, we must however be diligent not to fall into a "hermeneutics of faith" (Josselson, 2004) and to continue investigating the power relations at stake within the queer cause field (Colussi, 2023) at all scales of action.

To complement this analysis, more research has to be done with the activist side of the nexus to raise up the community collectives' voices and acknowledge their diversity (Bain & Podmore, 2021). Based on initial insights from the Geneva case, some community members advocate for a plurality of modes of action to enhance dialogue with politicians, while carrying out more radical actions in parallel. This will notably open to further reflections on the professionalisation of certain activist paths at the interface of political. Finally, it would be interesting to research further the city's participation in international networks linked to the international Geneva, such as the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association; Egides; or Rainbow Cities Network. This will help better understand



the entanglement of political issues from a translocal perspective, while reflecting deeper on the “paradoxical possibilities of new worldings” (Hutta, 2010, p. 154) offered by the continuous remaking of power relations in the field.

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