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(Recto running head) Iceland's Marriage Equality Debate

[The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in the Journal of the History of Sexuality 33:3 (2024), 390–417, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/15/article/937491>.]

The Centrifugal Force: Neoliberalism and Nationality in
Iceland's Marriage Equality Debate, 1996–2015

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In 2019 the conservative Icelandic minister of justice, Áslaug Arna Sigurbjörnsdóttir, was a speaker at the annual General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, the country's national church. Such speeches are a tradition at the synod, showcasing the strong and usually cordial relationship between church and state. That year, however, the speech struck a remarkable new tone.

A few months before, a documentary series called Svona fólk (People like that) had premiered on Icelandic television to great acclaim. The series told the story of the Icelandic gay

and lesbian rights struggle from the 1970s to the present day.¹ Its final episode focused on a debate about marriage equality that rocked Icelandic society in the late 1990s and 2000s. During that period, the leadership of the national church argued that same-sex unions should not be equated to heterosexual marriage and lobbied the Icelandic legislature to keep them distinct. Over the 2000s the church was pressured into retreating step by step on the issue. In 2010 the government of Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, the world's first openly homosexual head of government, ignored the protests of the church leadership and passed an amendment to Icelandic marriage law, making it gender neutral.² The church adopted its rituals to the new law and accepted marrying same-sex couples but reserved for each priest the right to refuse, as individuals, to officiate at such ceremonies. After a brief controversy in 2015, the General Synod of the church voted to revoke this right, ending the debate.³

All this had been brought back into the public limelight by the last episode of the documentary series and was the main thread running through the minister's speech. She noted that during this same period, the national church's membership had plummeted: at the beginning of the 1990s, it counted around 90 percent of the Icelandic population; at the moment of writing, 56.7 percent of Icelanders are members.⁴ The minister connected

this development directly with the marriage equality debate, admonishing the church for having

failed to understand the sign of the times when it came to gays and lesbians in the hour of need. The national church was completely out of sync with the nation, a large majority of which had already, at the beginning of the [twenty-first] century, become supportive of gays' and lesbians' efforts to obtain their self-evident human rights. . . . The national church must learn from its mistakes. . . . The gay and lesbian struggle . . . was--and is--a part of that progress of humanity that has taken place in the last few centuries. The church's stance on gay and lesbian issues drove many people away from it, not only gays and lesbians but also [their] families and friends who could not understand the church leaders' discourse about homosexuality as a sickness or a sin.⁵

According to the minister, the church's past stance on marriage equality fundamentally threatened its status. While the nation had marched forward along with the general "progress of humanity" over "the last few centuries," the church had held the nation back, working against its interests. Thus, marriage

equality had split the nation from the church; a national church that was "out of sync with the nation" whose name it carried faced an existential problem.

This was an unprecedented critique of the church from a government minister, which led to a quick and similarly unprecedented response. Shortly before Pride Month 2020, the church's leader, the bishop of Iceland, formally apologized to "the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and all who have experienced prejudice, discrimination and exclusion at the hands of the national church." She declared that the church, "with humility toward history," planned to become "the vanguard of love, human rights, and diversity." It initiated a project called One History--One Step, a collaboration between the church and Samtökin '78, the National Queer Organization of Iceland (hereafter abbreviated as S78).⁶ The project collects personal histories from queer Icelanders about discrimination and prejudice they have suffered at the hands of national church clergy and publishes them anonymously online.⁷ The church presented this as an act of penance for its sins and a bid for reconciliation: it sought a return to the good graces not only of Iceland's LGBTQ+ community but also, through it, of the Icelandic nation.

At the same time, the church began work on "find[ing] out what it is that the nation is looking for and how we can meet

its needs," as a report from 2021 put it, and started to develop a "brand guide" for its priests and staff. This was necessary to improve the church's public relations, as the church was "no longer a state institution" but "on the free market, and there your image is what counts."⁸ So it was not only through reconciliation with the LGBTQ+ community but also through neoliberal marketing that the church aimed to get back in step with the nation.

This is an extraordinary point in the historical development of the relationship between three important agents in recent Icelandic history: the national church, the state, and Iceland's LGBTQ+ community. At the beginning of the 1990s, church, state, and nation were conceived of as practically one, while queer Icelanders were either marginalized within Iceland or living abroad as "sexual-political refugees," as Icelandic queer activists of the 1980s put it.⁹ Only three decades later, not only had marriage equality been achieved, but that equality was strongly identified with state and nation, while both had become discursively estranged from the church.

How did the Icelandic nation and state, through marriage equality, come to be identified with the "progress of humanity"? How did the national church come to be constructed as "out of sync" with this progress and so with nation and state? How did reconciliation with the LGBTQ+ community and the embrace of

neoliberalism become configured as the way back into sync with nation and state and so with the "progress of humanity"? And what is the meaning of the nation and the institution of marriage as performed by these discourses?

This article will attempt to answer these questions genealogically by tracing the emergence of marriage equality as a topic in Icelandic public discourse that was contested and debated between church, state, and LGBTQ+ community. The time frame is defined by the 1996 law establishing civil "registered partnerships" between same-sex couples, on the one hand, and the 2015 removal of national church priests' right to refuse to marry same-sex couples, on the other.

It may seem surprising that the time frame does not start earlier, that is, that there is no treatment of debates about marriage equality from before 1996. However, while individual priests were indeed, before that time, opposed to same-sex marriage in any form on homophobic grounds, I have chosen to focus on the views and actions of the church leadership and the majority of the clergy. These supported the institution of registered partnership in 1996, and for them, the "problem" of marriage equality only emerged in its wake. Loud, homophobic minority views, while potentially of interest, tend to divert attention from the much subtler exercises of power at the hands of the supposedly moderate majority, which shies away from overt

homophobia but has a much greater influence on national imaginaries, political processes, and queer people's lives. My focus is not on homophobia from the margins but on inclusions and exclusions from the center.

The Case of Iceland

Why this focus? In the relatively recent field of Icelandic queer history, the marriage equality debate remains unexplored.¹⁰ The debate has been the object of some attention in the field of theology, where the focus is on the debate's religious, ecclesiological, and ethical implications for Lutheranism in general and the national church of Iceland in particular.¹¹ In this article, however, I will not focus on the religious angle, instead viewing the national church as a political entity that both exercises and is subject to power through discourse. This allows me to bring out the implications of the Icelandic marriage equality debate for the intersection of queerness, neoliberalism, and nation. These, I argue, are profound due to the special position national churches enjoy in the few countries that possess such institutions--above all the Nordic nation-states (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland).¹²

While the legal and constitutional status of the national churches differs significantly from one Nordic country to

another, from full state church (Denmark) to more or less formal independence from the state (the rest), they all enjoy a unique and privileged position compared with other churches and institutions.¹³ Sociologist of religion José Casanova has pointed out the peculiar nature of the Nordic "fusion of the Lutheran Church, the state, and the nation," where "the church becomes an administrative unit" of the state that "even today still falls under parliamentary (popular-national-democratic) regulation and supervision."¹⁴ This fusion has a paradoxical character, as the Nordic countries have, on the one hand, "a highly secular public (in terms of belief and practice)" but, on the other, "a strong religious presence in their legal systems and public institutions."¹⁵ The Nordic nations are, in a sense, unimaginable without their national churches, yet at the same time, their populations maintain a certain distance from their churches.

This article will view the nation through Benedict Anderson's definition as an "imagined political community."¹⁶ Seen through that lens, the national churches obviously form a vital part of Nordic national imaginaries. However, their status is not neutral and fixed. It depends instead on good relations with the state and the passive allegiance of the "highly secular public," for whom the church may appear as no more than a "presence" in "legal systems and public institutions"--perhaps the most important of which is the institution of marriage.

During the research period, the meaning of marriage was changing under the influence of neoliberalism.¹⁷ Iceland was no exception to that development. Between 1991 and 2009 Iceland had enthusiastic self-proclaimed neoliberal governments.¹⁸ It was under their auspices that the Icelandic lesbian and gay community moved toward ever-increasing legal rights and social acceptance, a process structured by neoliberal discourses.¹⁹ Wendy Brown has characterized contemporary neoliberalism as “a normative order of reason developed over three decades into a widely and deeply disseminated governing rationality” that aims at the “economization” and “financialization” of everything.²⁰ This includes marriage. As Michelle Marzullo has argued, in the neoliberal worldview, marriage is seen as a kind of merger contract between free market actors; the gender of the individuals to be married becomes less relevant than the security, responsibility, and capital generated by the contract.²¹ This view stands in contrast with the old religious understanding of marriage as a reproductive and societal covenant before God and the subset of that understanding found in the Lutheran Nordic countries, where it is at the same time a covenant before the state, fused with church and nation.²²

Further, in the Nordic countries, national church priests have the legal power to officiate marriages. It should be noted how exceptional this arrangement is, as in most countries,

religious institutions merely perform blessings over marriages, which, in themselves, have no legal significance; legal recognition comes from a separate application to the civil registry. Marriage ceremonies in the Nordic national churches, however, have a double function as both religious and civil ceremonies at once.²³ As a joint state and church venture, marriage becomes a potential field of conflict between national church and nation-state when faced with issues dividing ecclesiastical and state policy. This, in turn, creates tensions around the imaginary of the nation.

This makes the Nordic national churches an intriguing and underexplored field for the study of the intersection of neoliberalism, nationality, and queerness. How these churches respond to the question of marriage equality and how that response is dealt with in public discourse and by the state have implications on the very techniques of nation formation in the contemporary neoliberal Western world. In this article, I will focus on the Icelandic case while making brief comparisons with the rest of the Nordics in passing. Full comparative research between the Nordics is a larger topic than this article has space for, but I sincerely hope more such work is forthcoming.

Theory

This article will make use of the theoretical frame of the history of sexuality and queer history, utilizing concepts from queer theory and critiques of neoliberalism. As such, my viewpoint is Foucauldian in seeing sexuality as a construct of discourses of power (ever variable and so historical) rather than as anything innate or natural (and so unchanging and ahistorical). To understand sexuality in history, Foucault argued, one must focus on these changing discourses and use them to critique the power relations between state and citizen, subject and institution, discipline and resistance.²⁴

Following Foucault, I view neoliberalism as a "general art of government" aimed at modeling the "overall exercise of political power . . . on the principles of a market economy." In Foucault's view, neoliberalism intervenes "on society as such, in its fabric and depth," leading to a "general regulation of society by the market." In this way, an "enterprise society" is born where people are seen and see themselves as "human capital," managing their portfolios on the market of social relations. This leads to the emergence of neoliberal subjectivity, through which people understand their place in the world in market terms.²⁵ In quietly imposing this worldview, neoliberal government "structure[d] the possible field of action" of its subjects by "guid[ing] the possibility of

conduct" and "put[ting] in order the possible outcome," a process Foucault referred to as neoliberal governmentality.²⁶

Many scholars have studied the effect of neoliberal governmentality and subjectivity on queer people and their status in modern Western national imaginaries.²⁷ In this article, I will make use of Lisa Duggan's concept of homonormativity, which describes a neoliberal politics of "gay normality" born in the 1990s that "does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them," achieving this by limiting the scope of queer social movements to fighting for normative, state-given rights to marry, join the military, and so on.²⁸

Subsequently, Duggan's term became the subject of critique and redefinition by Susan Stryker, who pointed out an older use of the word in trans communities. There, it referred to the unspoken norm of (male) homosexuality's predominance in queer activist work, history, and theory. Stryker suggested enlarging the concept from the "macropolitical manifestations" of accommodations to neoliberalism to the "micropolitical level," focusing on how gay interests become aligned "with dominant constructions of knowledge and power" while "displac[ing] modes of embodiment calling into question the basis of authority from which normative voices speak."²⁹ If trans or genderqueer people are erased from view while gays and lesbians monopolize the

center stage, homonormative goals such as "gay marriage" become that much easier to justify. In the Icelandic marriage equality debate, this is evident in the near-exclusive use of the formulation "gay and lesbian marriage" (hjónaband samkynhneigðra) to describe the topic of the debate. Thus, the fact that full marriage equality allows any couples, no matter their gender identities or sexual orientations, to marry was lost to the debate. This significant fact is brought out by Stryker's refinement of the term homonormativity: the Icelandic marriage equality debate may be seen as homonormative in both Duggan's and Stryker's sense.

Jasbir Puar further expanded the concept of homonormativity with her analysis of "homonormative nationalism," or homonationalism. This gives name to the emergence in the 2000s of discourses presenting the homonormative inclusion of some queer people into Western national imaginaries as a sign of national progress and superiority over non-Western others. This idea of superiority rests on sexual exceptionalism, that is, the discursive construction of a given nation's extraordinary freedom in sexual matters, granted both to its normative heterosexual and its homonormative LGBTQ+ citizens, especially through the extension of marriage rights.³⁰ In the case of Iceland, this merged into an already existing "Nordic exceptionalism," that is, the idea that the Nordic countries

have fundamentally different histories and national characters from other nation-states. This, the story goes, has made the Nordic countries exceptionally happy, progressive, just, and equal--models for the rest of the world. This narrative overshadows or erases the long history of Nordic colonialism, racism, and violence against marginalized groups.³¹ It may also make the Nordic countries especially susceptible to homonationalism, the groundwork having already been laid by Nordic exceptionalism.³²

Given this article's focus on neoliberalism, homonormativity, homonationalism, marriage, nation, and church--that is, on normative technologies, institutions, concepts, and processes--one might ask whether the research has a "queer" referent at all and whether it is really "queer history" that is being told. Yet all norms produce their own antitheses. This article will indeed focus on the normative, but with the aim of showing up the constructive interplay between norm and queerness, where queerness is seen as what normality expels through establishing itself as normal.³³ As I will argue, the marriage equality debate had an instrumental role in creating a new conception of what was normal and national and thereby also of what was strange, foreign, and queer. In this way, even so normative a figure as the former bishop of Iceland may be the object--perhaps to his horror--of queer history.

Method

As for methodology, this article will yet again follow a Foucauldian path. I will employ the genealogical method, aiming to write what Foucault called a "history of the present," that is, the use of historical analysis to question, unsettle, and disturb unquestioned certainties of the present, so opening up possibilities of change.³⁴ While Foucault never defined this methodology exactly, I will follow David Garland's definition of it as tracing "how contemporary practices and institutions emerged out of specific struggles, conflicts, alliances, and exercises of power"; thus, by "presenting a series of troublesome associations and lineages," one may reveal how "institutions and practices we value and take for granted today are actually more problematic or more 'dangerous' than they otherwise appear."³⁵

My focus is on public discourses and public concepts of nation, normality, and queerness. So to gather sources, I used a variety of search terms relating to the marriage equality debate to build an archive of texts from five online databases: the journal and newspaper database timarit.is, the national church sermon archive kirkjan.is, the Icelandic parliament website althingi.is, the LGBTQ+ interview archive svonafolk.is, and the previously mentioned reconciliation project einsagaeittskref.is.

This online archive was complemented by four essential print documents: the bishop of Iceland's 2001 encyclical letter and three official reports from church and state on the legal and social status of lesbians and gays in Iceland. Out of this archive, I extracted around one hundred texts of varying length that I felt offered important perspectives on the research questions. These texts form the backbone of the article and will be treated, mostly chronologically, in four research sections.

In the first research section, I will sketch the background, that is, the historical conditions out of which the public debate about marriage equality emerged. I will show how the 1996 "registered partnership" legislation came to be, what problems it was created to solve, and the problems it in turn caused, of which marriage equality was to be the solution. In the second, I will analyze the national church leadership's reaction to demands for marriage equality as they gained ever more traction over the 2000s. In the third, I will analyze the counterreaction against the church among Icelandic LGBTQ+ people and members of the Icelandic parliament. In the fourth, I will analyze the end of the debate, when the state established its power over the national church in matters of marriage and today's status quo was reached.

One should note that the very meaning of the word "marriage" was contested in the debate. For the leadership of the national

church, maintaining a distinction between ecclesiastical, heterosexual "marriage" and civil, same-sex "registered partnership" was vital, while for some LGBTQ+ couples, problematizing or disregarding such distinctions was both a private conviction and a public weapon. In this article, I will mirror the debate participants' points of view, sometimes maintaining the distinction and sometimes disregarding it (within the bounds of clarity), depending on whose point of view is being presented. This seems to be the most effective way to show the complexity of the debate and the stakes introduced by its participants.

Background

Icelandic lesbian and gay activism and organization started late--in the mid-1970s. In the early 1980s S78, the previously mentioned national organization of (at that time only) lesbians and gays, found its voice as a radical provocateur in Icelandic society. In S78's publications, Icelandic lesbians and gays were described as "sexual-political refugees" from their home, as many of them chose to live abroad in metropolises with lesbian and gay scenes (most commonly in Copenhagen). S78 campaigned to bring these refugees home by creating acceptable living conditions for them in Iceland. It demanded rights, legal

protection, and recognition for lesbians and gays but critiqued the idea of assimilating to straight society.³⁶

This critical outsider voice was ignored on the political stage until the AIDS crisis forced the authorities' hand. In the mid-1980s the National Health Authority and the City of Reykjavik started to collaborate with S78 for purposes of AIDS prevention. The national church, at that time a state church, followed suit, issuing its first official statement mentioning homosexuality in 1987. The statement warned against "one-night stands, promiscuity, and loose morals" and called upon "all Christians, homosexual and heterosexual, to show responsibility in their sex lives." However, the statement was careful to "condemn no one," instead encouraging all to "show AIDS victims and their relatives respect and true brotherly love."³⁷ The topic of same-sex marriage first emerged from this background of state and church interaction with lesbians and gays in order to combat AIDS.

In 1989 Denmark became the world's first state to legalize so-called registered partnerships (registreret partnerskab), a limited civil union for same-sex couples at which religious organizations were legally banned from officiating. This was the lead followed by all the Nordic countries in subsequent years.³⁸ In Iceland registered partnership emerged as official policy through two official reports on homosexuality, one released by a

parliament committee on the legal and social status of gays and lesbians in 1994, the other by a national church committee on the theological and ethical status of homosexuality in 1996. Both were the results of a dialogue between the state, the national church, and S78.³⁹ The two reports were complementary, designed to build a state-church consensus on the issue of homosexuality and society--a consensus, as it turned out, based on registered partnership.⁴⁰

In the reports, in keeping with the original purpose of state-church-S78 dialogue, registered partnership was not only advocated as a matter of equality and human rights.

Institutionalized monogamy was also meant to combat AIDS.⁴¹ Civil married and monogamous, the reports implied, Icelandic gays and lesbians would free themselves from the stigma of the disease. They would be able to return home from their "exile" abroad and be brought into the purview and care of the welfare state. They would be made into "responsible" citizens practicing what the church report called "the sexual ethics of love," in return for which they would gain legal rights, state protection from discrimination, and social acceptance.⁴² Thus, registered partnership had the double function of freeing Icelandic gays and lesbians from the shadow of AIDS and granting them normality and nationality.⁴³ Notably absent from this invitation into the nation were bisexual people, trans people, and other queer

groups, who were not represented by S78 and ignored by the reports' authors. Thus, the reports are deeply homonormative in both Duggan's and Stryker's sense.

Consensus being reached, the government proposed a registered partnership bill in 1996, generally following the Danish model. The bishop of Iceland gave a formal opinion on the bill and granted it his full support.⁴⁴ In keeping with the close cooperation between church and state on the issue, there was very little conservative opposition in parliament; the bill was accepted with only a single dissenting vote.⁴⁵ Yet this near-perfect consensus would come under immediate pressure from the people the law addressed itself to: Icelandic gays and lesbians.

The consensus between church and state rested on a clear distinction being maintained between civil registered partnerships and church marriages. As soon as the first registered partnership ceremonies took place in the summer of 1996, the trouble with them became apparent. In newspaper coverage of the ceremonies, the words "registered partnership" are rarely found, but words for "marriage" abound.⁴⁶ The legal distinction did not translate into public discourse. This would influence the people who, at that time, wished to marry--not "register their partnership with"--their same-sex partners.

I will take two early same-sex marriages as examples. The first offers a clear delineation of the problematics of the new

marriage form, while the second showcases how the status quo could be resisted and circumvented. The first took place in 1996 and is described in a 2022 interview published by the previously mentioned One History--One Step project. In it, an anonymous woman relates how she and her partner married as soon as it became legal, choosing to have the ceremony in her partner's hometown in the countryside:

The ceremony took place in the yard in front of the [town] church because it had been made perfectly clear that it was not possible to have the ceremony inside the church. . . . I didn't set one foot in the church until afterward because there was some singing [there] in the evening. . . . [F]or my wife, who was raised in a church culture in a church town, . . . [it was] odd . . . not being able to marry in church. . . . [The guests] came to understand this: "Why are we outside, why isn't this all being done inside the church?" . . . It was then that it suddenly dawned on everyone: "Oh--that's not allowed!"⁴⁷

The ceremony's proximity to a national church building had the effect of dramatizing the legal distinction between registered partnerships and heterosexual marriage. The couple and their

guests stood in front of a church and took part in a ceremony whose purpose and function were closely associated with the building. However, due to that very fact, they were excluded from entering it. An invisible border separated the registered partnership ceremony outside the church and the parallel marriage ceremonies that took place inside it. Yet as soon as the ceremony was over, the church again opened the border, letting the guests in for communal singing. So community with the church was broken only during the ceremony itself, then restored after it. Yet the couple and the guests must have reentered the church with a new subjectivity. Having once been shut out, reentering becomes fraught with meaning; the couple and their guests must have gained a new understanding of the conditionality of community with the church. This generated resentment and resistance, as is evident in the interview where the anonymous woman describes her abiding disgust at the national church arising from this experience.⁴⁸

This resentment was all the stronger because of the national church's status. Since it was seen as part of the Nordic fusion of church, state, and nation, exclusion from one part of the three implied exclusion from them all. This feeling could be shared by the marriage guests, whose sudden and surprised realization of exclusion is brought out in the interview. Many of them--indeed, probably most of them--must have been

heterosexual national church members (as most of the population of Iceland was at the time), but while they participated in the ceremony, even they were brought face to face with the invisible border, perhaps changing their perspective on the relationship between citizen, church, state, and nation.

Our second marriage--the first church marriage of a same-sex couple in Iceland--presents a case of resistance against this problematic status quo.⁴⁹ This was the 1997 wedding of Hanna María Karlsdóttir and Sigurborg Daðadóttir. In a 1997 interview the couple related how they had registered their partnership the year before but were unhappy with the civil ceremony. The couple started looking for a priest to perform a blessing ceremony over their partnership ex post facto. While the national church had not expressed any doctrinal opposition to such ceremonies--indeed, the 1996 church report had encouraged the church leadership to allow them--the church did not create a ritual for its priests to do so until 1999.⁵⁰ So the couple found themselves stopped at the same invisible border as the anonymous woman had the year before.⁵¹

Not to be dissuaded, the couple approached a sympathetic priest belonging to a small splinter congregation from the national church, Fríkirkjan (the Free Church), which was gaining a reputation for its openness to gays and lesbians. The priest agreed to bless the union but cautioned against using

Fríkirkjan's own church for the ceremony, fearing backlash from his flock. Instead, he suggested using a nonconsecrated church to avoid dealing with a congregation. The couple opted for a museum church in Reykjavík and were married there in the summer of 1997.⁵² Footage from the event is shown in an episode of the documentary series Svona fólk, the most striking feature of which is the very normality of the ceremony: it was seemingly a traditional church marriage in all respects.⁵³

As the couple stressed in the interview, this traditional character--a ceremony held in a church, conducted by a priest reciting the familiar ritual, and in the presence of a large gathering of guests--was what made the ceremony true marriage, as opposed to the civil ceremony they had previously had. This, and no less, they felt they had a "right to . . . like everyone else," since they were "normal people" to whom parliament had given "the same right [to marry] as other citizens."⁵⁴

So the will of parliament, which, by implication, was also the will of the nation, was to grant lesbians and gays normality and citizenship through marriage rights. However, this national will had been thwarted by the national church. Normality and citizenship could not be found at the civil registry but belonged to traditional church marriage only--a ceremony that the national church monopolized and blocked lesbians and gays from partaking in. Hanna María and Sigurborg had managed to

circumvent the monopoly, finding a loophole into church marriage and so into normality and nationality.⁵⁵ They had shown that one could slip past this gatekeeper of the national imaginary; in this way, they contributed to a discursive split between nation and national church.

To sum up, the registered partnership law had been created in consensus between church and state in the spirit of the Nordic fusion of both with the nation. However, when it came into effect, it created a new subjectivity in which this fusion was destabilized, even split apart, as "registered couples" and their friends and families felt themselves pushed out of one element of the fusion at the same time as another element invited them in. It was from this instability that the same-sex marriage debate grew, with a central question underlying it: What exactly is the institution of marriage?

The chairman of S78, Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, offered an analysis of the problem in a 1997 interview. "Let's just look coolly at the situation--there's no difference between the church and other institutions. They are selling a certain product . . . but when gays and lesbians come out of hiding . . . then that product, that shelf is not available for us. Then it's only available for others. . . . This is really just bad salesmanship, to close the shelves off for a portion of your customers."⁵⁶ While the registered partnership law indeed made

gays and lesbians into "citizens," they were still "second-class citizens" due to "a paradox in the law," as Margrét Pála put it in another interview.⁵⁷ Thus, the chairman implied that the question of gays' and lesbians' access to marriage and so to full citizenship and nationality was essentially one of discrimination in services offered--of being excluded from a market.

This was significant, for as Foucault argued, the neoliberal state sees it as its duty to promote equality of market access.⁵⁸ The state, in this view, sooner or later had to intervene in the same-sex marriage debate and upset the 1996 consensus. The new subjectivity that emerged out of the "paradox" of the registered partnership law became bound up with neoliberalism. If gays and lesbians were to find their way toward national inclusion, the path would be through the neoliberal reformulation of marriage as a market product, access to which was unfairly blocked by the national church.

The Church Reaction

This new view of marriage functioned as a direct challenge to the national church. Its own theological, Evangelical Lutheran stance was that marriage was a traditional, reproductive, heterosexual covenant before both God and state.⁵⁹ The task of

defending this stance fell to a new bishop, Karl Sigurbjörnsson, who took office in 1997. His was a new role. That same year, church and state finalized a deal that granted the church autonomy over its own affairs. While the church was still financed by the state and its staff were still state employees, it was no longer subordinate to any ministry, and the church synod became its independent governing body.⁶⁰ This created a separate ecclesiastical power structure parallel with that of the state, with the bishop, so to speak, in the role of the prime minister (PM), the synod in the role of parliament, and the clergy in the role of civil servants. (A similar but not identical arrangement has existed in Finland since 1919, in Sweden since 2000, and in Norway since 2012.)⁶¹ While possessing no executive power, the Icelandic "church government" of bishop and synod nevertheless exercised power through discourse and as such played a primary role in the same-sex marriage debate. While the bishop should not be seen as the sole voice of the church (a sizeable part of the clergy disagreed with his views on marriage), his voice was by far the most prominent and so wielded the greatest discursive power.⁶² Therefore, his views were fundamentally important for the marriage equality debate.

Karl expressed these views at length in his encyclical letter, published in book form in 2001. Throughout the book, Karl contrasted an ideal, tradition-bound past with the present,

these "times of growing individualism, consumption, and spectatorship . . . where the highest goal seems to be to find oneself no matter the cost, find oneself, be one's own master." It was a world of "egocentric relativism," "globalism," and "the all-sacred point of view of money," all of which "sings the praises of a culture . . . that above all emphasizes the satisfaction of needs" and does not "admit any boundaries and limitations." Ten years of neoliberalism had warped Icelanders' views on traditional values and institutions, chief among them the institution of marriage.⁶³

Karl lamented the rising divorce rate and the commodification of marriage ceremonies, which were increasingly supposed to reflect the personalities of the couple rather than the ritual of the church. Such individualism threatened "the family in Icelandic society," which was "on the defensive because of the centrifugal force of the culture of consumption, which seeks to separate and scatter." Neoliberalism was thus characterized as a brute, inertial movement spinning society through unpredictable, ceaseless changes, always away from the moral center of traditional Christianity. Having established this movement as an existential threat to the church and society itself, Karl launched directly into a chapter on homosexuality, which was the first public treatment of the topic by a bishop of the church.⁶⁴

Karl took a "love the sinner, hate the sin" stance, stating that the church "could not sanction [homosexuals'] choices or way of life," but he emphasized that the church had not thereby "excluded homosexuals," who had, since 1999, been allowed to receive blessings over their partnerships from national church priests. However, Karl was adamant that these blessings were not marriage, which was "more than a confirmation of love and cohabitation between two individuals." Marriage proper had "the reciprocity of the sexes as a premise." Ostensibly changing the topic, Karl went on to discuss how morality in modern society had become "dependent on the whims of the individual, his interests, his taste." What would happen to culture and society, he asked, if "rights tower[ed] over duty in the general discourse?" In a pluralist society where "all kinds of views are tolerated," there was a danger that "sentimentality and superficial uprightness should dismiss good morals as a private matter." This would mean that society "would become the victim of greed, lust, and power."⁶⁵

Appending this message to the bishop's writings about homosexuality and marriage was a pointed statement. Karl's prime example of the destructive effects of neoliberalism's centrifugal force was the demand for marriage equality, and indeed, homosexuality itself appeared as an expression of neoliberal disregard for traditional morality. Karl made this

latter point even clearer in his New Year's sermon of 2006, in which he castigated Icelanders as being "drunk on the sole wish for gold, for treasure, for the satisfaction of our desires and inclinations [hneigðir]." The word hneigðir nods toward the Icelandic word for homosexuality, samkynhneigð (literally, "same-sex inclination"), implying that homosexual desire was a form of uncontrolled, neoliberal greed. Its most extreme form was the wish for marriage equality, which, if granted "in order to meet various needs, impulses, and inclinations [hneigðir]," would mean that "something new has come into existence, new moral norms without parallel in civilization." The ancient institution of marriage would be "abolished," or, as he notoriously put it in a TV interview on the same day, "chuck[ed] . . . on the trash heap."⁶⁶

According to the bishop, same-sex marriage was an oxymoron. Marriage's "fundamental premise," as the bishop put it in a formal opinion on a marriage equality bill in 2008, was "to join together, biologically and socially, the dimensions of being a father"; marriage was about "biological and sociological paternity in a public, acknowledged obligation."⁶⁷ Therefore, marriage was by definition patriarchal, heterosexual, reproductive, and traditional; the wish to appropriate marriage for any other purpose was to be understood as the destructive

effects of the intoxicating centrifugal force of neoliberal change sweeping over Icelandic society.

In order to resist this force, the church appealed to the Nordic fusion of church, state, and nation, insisting on its own centrality in it. Over the 2000s, in public forums and formal opinions to parliament, the church leadership argued that marriage law could not be changed unilaterally by the legislature. The leadership first pointed out that the state had renounced the right to influence the inner workings of the church in 1997, when the latter had gained autonomy from the former. Then it reasoned that the institution of marriage itself was part of the inner workings of the church. Hence, any proposals for marriage equality would have to pass through the General Synod before they passed through parliament; on this issue, the power of the state was limited, the church having precedence over it.⁶⁸ This created a kind of constitutional crisis, with the parallel government of the church entering open conflict with the state over its reach and legitimacy.⁶⁹

Not content with just this public argument, the church also used its back-channel influence, especially on conservative politicians. When parliament was preparing a new raft of legislative reforms to reduce discrimination against gays and lesbians in 2004\5, the bishop lobbied the relevant parliament committee and the conservative government in order to quash any

moves toward full marriage equality.⁷⁰ These efforts were successful. The resultant bill, issued in 2005, proposed to equalize the legal effects of registered partnerships and marriage. However, it retained the legal distinction between them and continued to define the former as a civil affair only.⁷¹ Promoting it, the conservative PM, Halldór Ásgrímsson, justified this by maintaining that "it's dubious to put into law a warrant for ecclesiastical consecrations of homosexual partnerships over the protests of the national church. That would in effect be pushing the church into a corner, and I don't believe such things are appropriate for the relationship between church and state."⁷² The church had successfully employed the Nordic fusion of state, church, and nation as a political weapon.

The Counterreaction

At the very start of the marriage equality debate, however, another idea emerged that would reduce the effectiveness of this weapon. As previously mentioned, the 1996 registered partnership bill was uncontroversial, with members of parliament (MPs) from all parties praising it from the pulpit; one remarked that it would "attack promiscuity, strengthen family bonds, and stop or reduce prejudice."⁷³ Some noted that the bill went one step further than its Danish model in granting registered partners

joint legal custody over their children. One MP enthused that "if parliament will be so lucky as to put this provision into law, it will be a great achievement not only in gays' and lesbians' struggle here in Iceland but also in their rights struggle internationally. . . . I believe this bill . . . will bring Iceland fame . . . in other countries and for all time."⁷⁴

Hence, not only did registered partnership legislation have a local, homonormative purpose in fighting promiscuity and encouraging family formation among gays and lesbians, it also had foreign policy implications. The idea emerged that Icelanders could choose not only to content themselves with following the other Nordic countries' lead but also to overtake them and so gain international acclaim. In this discursive formulation, Iceland was competing in an international race for gay and lesbian rights, success in which was a matter of national pride, defeat a matter of national shame.

While present from the beginning, this idea was catapulted into the center of the marriage equality debate through a 2004 parliamentary report on the status of gays and lesbians in Iceland (again focusing only on those two groups and ignoring others in a homonormative manner). While refraining from suggesting full marriage equality, the report outlined in detail how other countries such as Denmark, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, and Belgium were granting same-sex couples ever

greater marriage rights. This, the report indicated, showed that Iceland was falling behind. As the report's authors saw it, the main obstacle to Iceland's catching up with or overtaking the rest was the national church and its opposition to allowing religious organizations to officiate at registered partnerships. The authors granted that the initiative for changing the status quo had to come from the church itself, but they firmly exhorted it to start the process.⁷⁵

In parliament the report was met with an explosion of discourse about the international race for marriage equality. As previously mentioned, in the report's wake, a raft of legislation was proposed that equalized the legal effects of registered partnerships, on the one hand, and marriages, on the other. Thereby, registered partners were granted full adoption rights, in which Iceland was second only to Sweden worldwide.⁷⁶ During the parliamentary debate, this prompted MPs to enthuse about Iceland's "leading role in the world," which had made it "a model for others"; the country was said to be either in the first place in the world in gay and lesbian rights or in the top five, depending on the MP speaking.⁷⁷ One went further, enthusing, "I've never been of the opinion that the national flag of Iceland should be flown [in the parliament chambers], but do you know, today I feel that . . . the rainbow flag should be flown [here], that multicolored flag that gays and lesbians

fly for themselves and for their future country, the future country where diversity is celebrated and everyone can enjoy life, where the entire spectrum of human life can live life to the full. I just want to say: Hip, hip, hooray!"⁷⁸ In this homonationalist discourse, the national team in the race for gay and lesbian rights requires a full display of support from the nation. The national church, however, refused to support the national colors (here metonymically one with the rainbow flag), creating a strong discursive distinction between church and nation-state and upsetting the fusion of the three.

In the logic of the homonationalist race, being in second place to Sweden was not sufficient; the pace had to be quickened, the competitors overtaken. In 2007 opposition MPs introduced a marriage equality bill in parliament that struck the registered partnership law off the books and instead introduced a single gender-neutral marriage law open to all adult couples. During the debate, the MP who had hoorayed the nation's legislative innovations two years before bemoaned that Icelanders now found themselves "follow[ing] in the footsteps of our Nordic neighbors" on gay and lesbian rights, when previously they had been "among the leaders." Once the Icelandic parliament had been "capable of taking the lead in these matters and standing at the forefront among nations"; the current bill was "an encouragement for us [MPs] to take the initiative and stand

at the front." Under these circumstances, waiting for the national church was not an option. As the MP argued, "It is the legislature that makes laws for this country and so for the church. The General Synod is not the country's lawgiver."⁷⁹ The MP dismissed the argument that the church synod had precedence over parliament in matters of marriage; on the contrary, parliament had a duty to overtake the church to safeguard Icelandic success in the race for marriage equality.

This was not the only argument made for dismissing the church's authority over marriage. Another MP argued that "in the [marriage] law now in effect, there is no mention of any Christian purpose"; indeed, modern marriage was "a voluntary agreement which people nowadays can relatively easily enter into and relatively easily leave." Marriage had changed: it no longer had anything to do with Christianity and so had nothing intrinsically to do with the church. So what was marriage, and what was the purpose of marriage equality legislation? The MP argued that it was "to ensure the continuing success of the wonderful institution [of marriage], which makes provision for certain human values [such as] a relationship of equals, a relationship for life, and faithfulness, by allowing adults who are in love, regardless of sexual orientation or gender, to be subject to this law."⁸⁰ The MP described marriage first in market terms ("voluntary agreement") and then slid into ideal terms

("human values" and "faithfulness"). In this way, she redefined marriage as a fungible commodity that nevertheless retained its old claims to social status and privilege. Marriage, the MP implied, was an agreement between market actors whose freedom of action it was the state's mandate to protect. The very "success" of that institution and so of its conservative social values depended on its being recast in market terms.

Here we see how MPs adopted and developed the idea of marriage as a product and, further, how neoliberal governmentality played a role in redefining the institution of marriage. Marriage was an unquestioned good; the state had to "allow" Icelanders to "be subject" to it, for it was a gift to be gladly accepted, not a power structure to be negotiated. In this way, the MPs' discourse on marriage equality "guide[d] the possibility of conduct" and "put in order the possible outcome."⁸¹ A person who chose not to marry was discursively constructed as lacking in human values and faithfulness, as was any institution that withheld marriage from a portion of the population. A queer person who opposed marriage on principle would be constructed as ungratefully rejecting the gifts offered by the benevolent state, while an antineoliberal, anti-marriage equality national church was seen as working against its own espoused values, not to mention those of the nation-state. New constructions of the normal and the national were emerging,

thereby also creating new notions of what was foreign and queer. Even the national church could now find itself in the latter category.

The 2007 marriage equality bill was defeated in parliament, as the Center-Right government of the time was against it. However, the debate showed how the discourses on the race for marriage equality and marriage as market product were undermining the church's position and estranging church from state and nation. As a priest put it in a newspaper article that same year, "A chasm between society and the church" was forming.⁸² In the marriage equality debate, a new argument was emerging, namely, that marriage equality was the national will, which the church was flouting. Among the first to employ this argument was Sigurborg Daðadóttir, one of the women married in Iceland's first same-sex church wedding in 1997. In a 2006 interview, she argued that "nation and parliament are in fact ready to take the final step" toward marriage equality. Instead of waiting for the church to bridge the "chasm between society and the church," she asked, "Why not just finish this now and be the first in the world to reach perfect equality?"⁸³

This idea was further developed in a newspaper article from 2007, in which many well-known Icelandic gays and lesbians were interviewed about their views on the marriage equality debate. They stressed that it was "as important [for gays and lesbians]

as for other Icelanders to have the possibility to get married in church," for it was "more than a religious institution in people's minds"; it was "an important part of society" itself. A church that stood in the way of gays and lesbians taking part in that society "cannot be worthy of the name national church," since "the nation wants to allow gays and lesbians to get married." In its recalcitrance, "the national church is working against the nation," and at its synods, the church was "debating not only whether it should cease this discrimination [between same-sex and heterosexual marriage] but also its future within the Icelandic nation."⁸⁴

If wanting marriage equality defined one's belonging to the nation, then there was a chasm between national church and nation-state, and that chasm was unbridgeable so long as the church resisted the will of the nation. The church stood in a paradoxical position: it was in itself "an important part of society" and so an object of desire that many gays and lesbians demanded inclusion in; yet at the same time, the church's exclusion of those same gays and lesbians diminished its standing within the society/nation and so weakened the desire to be included within it. For the national church to become national again, and for (some) gays and lesbians to gain full inclusion in the nation through it, it had to change its stance and so to be saved from itself.

The End of the Debate

In the last years of the 2000s, the national church was in retreat. Under "incredible pressure," according to the bishop, the 2007 General Synod accepted officiating registered partnerships with the caveat that a clear distinction between this service and that of heterosexual marriage be maintained.⁸⁵ The following year, parliament followed the synod's lead and changed the law concerning registered partnerships to allow religious organizations to officiate at them. Yet this concession did not ease the pressure on the church. In the media, the response from the LGBTQ+ community was negative. Anything less than full marriage equality, LGBTQ+ Icelanders maintained, was discrimination.⁸⁶ Yet the church leadership had been able to maintain the General Synod's precedence over parliament in matters of marriage--an authority that was about to be lost.

In 2008 a political sea-change took place in Iceland. The international financial crisis devastated the economy and upended Icelandic politics. The embattled Center-Right coalition government resigned in January 2009. Following an election, a new left-wing government--the first in the history of the Republic of Iceland--took power, led by the previously mentioned Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. Both parties in the new coalition

government had pledged marriage equality during the election campaign. They made good on their promise in 2010, when the government proposed repealing the registered partnership law and amending the marriage law to become gender neutral. This was done without consulting with or deferring to the church, except insofar as the bishop was formally asked for a public comment on the bill. He protested that the state was now creating "a new definition of marriage" that was based on "an ideology that springs from different roots than those which religion, civilization, and most states of the world have up until now taken as their ideal."⁸⁷

This comment stood in stark contrast to the discourse found in parliament. All MPs who spoke in the debate about the bill, whether from the government parties or the opposition, expressed firm support. The minister introducing the bill spoke about it "strengthening marriage even more as the lynchpin of the family in society."⁸⁸ An opposition MP said the bill gave "all individuals . . . the same legal conditions for creating a family," since "this is all about families when you get down to it."⁸⁹ The homonormative idea of marriage granting normality and nationality through procreative monogamous relationships was on full display. Homonationalism was also prominent through discourses of the international race for marriage equality. One MP spoke about how "proud" she was of "this part of our culture

here in Iceland," that is, being "in the lead when it comes to [lesbian and gay rights] worldwide." She encouraged Icelanders to celebrate the occasion and "use it [in order to gain] a greater voice for Iceland on the international stage."⁹⁰ Finally, MPs attacked the national church from the pulpit, invoking the discourse of marriage equality as the national will.⁹¹ One MP said that the church's "recalcitrance on these issues has been intolerable"; it had "not been a national church in this affair."⁹² The bill was adopted unanimously in June 2010.

The 2010 General Synod of the church met in the shadow of this law, which the synod president bemoaned as "a singular event in the history of [Icelandic] state-church communications" and "a sign of a colder mood toward the church than we have previously known."⁹³ The synod went on to amend the church's marriage rituals to allow same-sex couples to be married by priests. The bishop admitted defeat and publicly apologized to the gay and lesbian community. He emphasized that he had believed it to be his duty to take the side of "tradition"; however, "Icelandic society didn't want that but instead wanted to change the tradition."⁹⁴ In this way, the bishop himself took part in the discourse that maintained that the church had disassociated itself from the nation by flaunting the national will to marriage equality. In apologizing, he seemed to acknowledge the church's new position: having bowed to the

nation and the state, the church had rejoined the Nordic fusion but as a subordinate member; the centrifugal force had broken its primacy.

One of the first people to get married under the new law was the PM, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, and her long-time partner, author Jónína Leósdóttir. They had been registered partners since 2002, but on the day that the new law came into effect, they sent a request to the civil registry to change their status to that of a married couple. This was announced as a surprise at a mass celebrating the new law in Fríkirkjan, the gay-and-lesbian-friendly splinter congregation whose priest had married Hanna María and Sigurborg thirteen years before. At the beginning of the mass, which many prominent people from the LGBTQ+ community attended, a short message from the PM was read out, congratulating Icelandic gays and lesbians on their newfound rights, which, the message curtly concluded, "I have myself used."⁹⁵

Despite the unostentatious manner of the announcement and the private nature of the PM, one must consider this a kind of public statement. Having forced the church to offer her--the head of government--the ceremony of marriage as defined by law, she proceeded not to use it. She publicized this at an event held in a church that had split off from the national church and had presided over Iceland's first same-sex church marriage at a

time when the national church refused same-sex couples blessings, not to mention marriages. So she underlined and emphasized the state's new power over the national church, whose parallel governing structure she had definitively demoted to second-range status. Power over the institution of marriage was now uncontestably in the hands of the state; the church found itself in the position of being forced by law to offer the service of marriage to people who might even consider the church unworthy of it.

By law the church still retained the right for its priests to refuse to marry same-sex couples if their private convictions were against it, a right referred to as the priests' "freedom of conscience" (samviskufrelsi). This fact largely passed under the radar in public discourse until 2015, when a pro-marriage equality priest brought it to attention.⁹⁶ While no cases were reported of queer couples having been refused marriage on these grounds, the church was harshly criticized for the existence of the proviso.⁹⁷ Priests who supported marriage equality joined in the criticism, claiming that "the nation has long since made up its mind on this matter. The nation's freedom of conscience has long since dismissed prejudice against people's sexual orientation as antiquated and hurtful."⁹⁸ The church had to change its stance, "since Icelanders want to be exemplary in matters of human rights."⁹⁹ At the 2015 General Synod, the church

voted to remove priests' "freedom of conscience" when it came to marrying same-sex couples.¹⁰⁰ The discourse of marriage equality as the national will and the end goal of a progressive international race now carried the day among the clergy itself. The marriage equality debate was over.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the Icelandic marriage equality debate from its emergence in 1996 to its conclusion in 2015. Using the genealogical method, I have aimed to upset and disturb the popular view of the debate, exemplified by the minister of justice's 2019 General Synod speech, that it revolved around the Icelandic state and nation extending their hand to Iceland's LGBTQ+ community and forging ahead of the backward-looking national church on the path of the "progress of humanity." Instead, I have identified a different conflict altogether as the underlying field of contention: a debate about neoliberalism and nationality.

The debate's main poles were formed around two radically opposed conceptions of marriage. One was the traditional Evangelical Lutheran idea of marriage as a patriarchal, heterosexual, and reproductive covenant before God and the state mediated by tradition and its protector in Icelandic society,

the national church. The other was a new idea born from the rise of neoliberalism, which saw marriage as a market product, free access to which should be available to all and protected by the state.

In Iceland these two ideas came to a head in the late 1990s. In the beginning of that decade, state and church had entered into a dialogue with the lesbian and gay community in an effort to curb AIDS. A consensus was reached to invite gays and lesbians (but no other queer groups) into the nation through the institution of registered partnership. The church, however, insisted on maintaining a clear distinction between registered partnerships and traditional heterosexual marriages. In practice, this conflicted with the national inclusion that registered partnership was supposed to offer. Gays and lesbians found themselves in an awkward position vis-à-vis the "Nordic fusion" of church, state, and nation: they were invited in by one part (the state) but shut out by another (the church), which threw their relationship with the third part (the nation) into doubt.

However, a new path into nationality was emerging--through neoliberalism. By reformulating marriage as a product in a market and identifying the goal of the struggle with it, the leadership of the Icelandic lesbian and gay movement not only created a path to national inclusion but also made powerful

allies in parliament and society. Over the 2000s new ideas came to their aid in the struggle, such as the homonationalist notion of Iceland as a leading contender in an international race for marriage equality and the notion of marriage equality as the national will. Through these discourses, the marriage equality debate had a remarkable effect on the Icelandic national imaginary. The fusion of church, state, and nation was destabilized: things had started to shift and move in response to rapid societal changes that the bishop of the national church likened to a "centrifugal force" shaking the foundations of popular morality.

The bishop's metaphor may be useful to describe the changes that took place during the marriage equality debate. Centrifugal force affects inert objects within a moving frame, pushing them away from the frame's perceived center point. In Iceland during the research period, the state was, so to speak, in the center of a national imaginary that had started to move in response to neoliberal pressures. Thus, the centrifugal force started to act upon the antineoliberal national church, pushing it away from the imaginary center and so from the state. Meanwhile, Iceland's LGBTQ+ community, neoliberalized through homonormative and homonationalist discourses, seemed to be magnetically drawn from the margins toward the center and the state.

Correspondingly, the national imaginary shifted away from the preneoliberal conception of a nation formed through shared patriarchal heteronormative traditions to a new neoliberal conception of a nation of individual entrepreneurs gathered around the ideal of (market) freedom and competition at home and on the world stage. This also affected the status of marriage. Through the marriage equality debate, the institution of marriage became disassociated from the church and moved into the sphere of the state. In that process, it went through a quiet redefinition, moving away from the field of tradition associated with the church and into the new, state-dominated field of neoliberal governmentality.

This process created a new imaginary of normality, nationality, and queerness through processes of inclusion and exclusion. If we understand queerness as something created by norms as they establish themselves as normal, we see how the marriage equality debate played a vital role in establishing neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality as a national norm and resistance to it as othering and queer. Thus, the imaginary of the nation has shifted to privilege those who have adapted to neoliberal subjectivity and governmentality and disadvantage those who resist them. Marriage has become a neoliberal touchstone: undergoing it shows one's responsibility and willingness to subject oneself to the normal and the national,

no matter the gender of the spouses. Undoubtedly, this development improved the lives of many LGBTQ+ Icelanders and demoted a national church that many people (this article's author among them) found as homophobic as it was overbearing. Yet this should not shield the current moment from critique. If LGBTQ+ people's inclusion into the nation depends on the whims of neoliberal ideology, then their status is vulnerable to any changes to the neoliberal worldview. Looking at the political situation in the West today, that seems a very precarious position indeed.

About the Author

Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson is a scholar and translator currently working on his PhD in history at the University of Iceland. He has BA degrees in Latin and Greek from the University of Iceland and an MA degree in classical reception from the University of Bristol. His research has focused on the history of sexuality, the reception of the classical world, and queer history, on which he has written a number of articles. He is also the editor of the nineteenth-century diaries of Ólafur Davíðsson, a queer Icelandic scholar (Hundakæti: Dagbækur Ólafs Davíðssonar 1881\–1884 [Reykjavík: Mál & menning, 2018]).

This article is part of a research project supported by RANNÍS, the Icelandic Centre for Research, called "From Sexual Outlaws to Model Citizens: The Relations between Queer Sexualities and Nationality in Iceland." It includes two PhD projects. One, of which this article is part, focuses on the conditional inclusion of the model queer citizen into the Icelandic nation between 1990 and 2010. The other focuses on discourses of AIDS, foreignness, and nation in the 1980s and early 1990s (Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir, "Foreign Contamination? Construction of Sexual Deviancy in Iceland" [working title], PhD diss., University of Iceland, forthcoming). All translations in this article are mine. I would like to thank my supervisors, Íris Ellenberger and Michael Nebeling Petersen, for their helpful comments, along with the anonymous readers.

¹ On this series, see Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson, "Into the Enclosure: Collective Memory and Queer History in the Icelandic Documentary 'People Like That,'" NORA--Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research 30, no. 3 (July 2022): 208\–20.

² One should note that Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir was not "open" in the way one has come to expect of LGBTQ+ politicians today. Her long-term relationship with her partner, Jónína Leósdóttir, was kept secret for decades before being quietly made a matter of public record in the 2000s. It was not publicly discussed by

Sigurðardóttir until after she became PM in 2009. See Jónína Leósdóttir, Við Jóhanna (Reykjavík: Mál og menning, 2013); John F. Burns, "Iceland Names New Prime Minister," New York Times, 2 February 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/02/world/europe/02iceland.html>.

³ "Synji ekki samkynja pörum," Morgunblaðið, 29 October 2015, 2, Tímarit.is.

⁴ "Skráning í trú- og lífsskoðunarfélög fram til 1. desember 2023," Þjóðskrá, 14 December 2023, <https://www.skra.is/um-okkur/frettir/frett/2023/12/14/Skraning-i-tru-og-lifsskodunarfelog-fram-til-1.-desember-2023/>.

⁵ Áslaug Arna Sigurbjörnsdóttir, "Ávarp dómsmálaráðherra," Gerðir kirkjupings 59 (2019): 9\–11, Tímarit.is.

⁶ "Ein saga--eitt skref," Kirkjuritið 86, no. 1 (2021): 19, Tímarit.is.

⁷ The website is available at <https://www.einsagaeittskref.is/>.

⁸ Starfshópur um samskiptamál, Stefnumótun samskiptamála þjóðkirkjunnar (Reykjavík: Þjóðkirkjan, 2021), 3\–4, 7, https://kirkjan.is/library/Files/Malaskra-2021_2022/6.%20m%C3%A1ll%202021-2022.%20Fskj.%20%20Greinarger%C3%B0%20starfsh%C3%B3ps%20samskiptam%C3%A1lla.pdf.

⁹ Vilhjálmsson, "Into the Enclosure," 212\–17.

¹⁰ See Íris Ellenberger, Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, and Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir, eds., Svo veistu að þú varst ekki hér: Hinsegin sagnfræði og hinsegin saga á Íslandi (Reykjavík: Sögufélag, 2017); Íris Ellenberger, Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, and Hafdís Erla Hafsteinsdóttir, "Huldukonur: Hinsegin kynverund kvenna á Íslandi fyrir 1960: Heimildir, túlkanir, námsefni," 2022, <https://huldukonur.is/>; Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson, "The Boundaries of Pleasure: The Diary of Ólafur Davíðsson and the Heterotopia of the Nineteenth-Century Reykjavík Latin School," Scandinavian Journal of History 45, no. 5 (2020): 593\–614; Vilhjálmsson, "Into the Enclosure"; Ásta Kristín Benediktsdóttir, "Sódó Reykjavík: How Homosexuality Was Brought into Discourse in Early and Mid-Twentieth Century Iceland," NORA--Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research 30, no. 3 (July 2022): 194\–207; Íris Ellenberger and Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson, "'No Bare Bottoms': The Responsibilization of the Good Gay Citizen in Icelandic Media Discourses 1990\–2010," Journal of Homosexuality, 2 February 2023, 1\–22.

¹¹ See, for example, Sigríður Guðmarsdóttir, "In This Vesture Let There Be Diversity: Reading Augustine at Gay Pride Reykjavik," Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research 18 (2010): 125\–36; Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir, "Same-Sex Marriage: A Burning Issue in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland," in Exploring a

Heritage: Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the North, ed. Anne-Louise Eriksson, Göran Gunner, and Niclas Blåder, Church of Sweden Research Series 5 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 97\–114.

¹² Some scholars writing on the Nordic majority churches in English have preferred the term “folk church” or “people’s church” to translate the Danish and Norwegian folkekirke (see, for example, Maarit Jänterä-Jareborg, “A Scandinavian Perspective on Homosexuality, Equal Rights, and Freedom of Religion,” in Religious Freedom and Gay Rights, ed. Timothy Shah, Thomas Farr, and Jack Friedman [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016], 246\–68). However, the Icelandic term þjóðkirkjan must be translated as “national church,” as the Icelandic word þjóð clearly means “nation” rather than “folk” or “people.” Therefore, I have chosen to use “national church” for all the Nordic majority churches to maintain consistency.

¹³ Lene Kühle, “Religion and State: Complexity in Change,” in Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere: Comparing Nordic Countries, ed. Inger Furseth (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 81\–136.

¹⁴ José Casanova, “The Two Dimensions, Temporal and Spatial, of the Secular: Comparative Reflections on the Nordic Protestant and Southern Catholic Patterns from a Global Perspective,” in Secular and Sacred? The Scandinavian Case of Religion in Human Rights, Law and Public Space, ed. Rosemarie van den Breemer,

José Casanova, and Trygve Wyller (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 28.

¹⁵ Rosemarie van den Breemer, José Casanova, and Trygve Wyller, introduction to Van den Breemer, Casanova, and Wyller, Secular and Sacred?, 9.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 6\–7.

¹⁷ Michelle Marzullo, "Through a Glass, Darkly: US Marriage Discourse and Neoliberalism," Journal of Homosexuality 58, no. 6\–7 (2011): 758\–74.

¹⁸ Stefán Ólafsson, "Icelandic Capitalism--from Statism to Neoliberalism and Financial Collapse," in The Nordic Varieties of Capitalism, ed. Lars Mjøset, Comparative Social Research 28 (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2011), 1\–51.

¹⁹ Vilhjálmsón, "Into the Enclosure," 212\–16; Ellenberger and Vilhjálmsón, "No Bare Bottoms."

²⁰ Wendy Brown, Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 9\–10, 28. Brown has updated her arguments about neoliberalism since; see Wendy Brown, In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West, Wellek Library Lectures (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

²¹ Marzullo, "Through a Glass, Darkly."

²² Kari Melby et al., "The Nordic Model of Marriage," Women's History Review 15, no. 4 (2006): 651\–61.

²³ Mia Lövhelm et al., "Religion on the Political Agenda," in Furseth, Religious Complexity, 172\–76.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, Histoire de la sexualité, tome 1, La volonté du savoir (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

²⁵ Michel Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978\–1979, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 131\–33, 145\–49, 223\–30; see also Brown, Undoing the Demos.

²⁶ Quote from Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," Critical Inquiry 8, no. 4 (1982): 789\–90; see also Michel Foucault, Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977\–1978, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007); Nikolas S. Rose, Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self, 2nd ed. (London: Free Association Books, 1999); Salman Türken et al., "Making Sense of Neoliberal Subjectivity: A Discourse Analysis of Media Language on Self-Development," Globalizations 13, no. 1 (2016): 32\–46; David Chandler and Julian Reid, The Neoliberal Subject: Resilience, Adaptation and Vulnerability (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016); Christina Scharff, "The Psychic Life of Neoliberalism: Mapping the Contours of Entrepreneurial

Subjectivity," Theory, Culture & Society 33, no. 6 (2016): 107-22.

²⁷ See, for example, David L. Eng, The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Michael Nebeling Petersen, "Somewhere, over the Rainbow: Biopolitiske rekonfigurationer af den homoseksuelle figur" (PhD diss., University of Copenhagen, 2012); Barry D. Adam, "Constructing the Neoliberal Sexual Actor: Responsibility and Care of the Self in the Discourse of Barebackers," Culture, Health & Sexuality 7, no. 4 (2005): 333-46.

²⁸ Lisa Duggan, The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 50.

²⁹ Susan Stryker, "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity," Radical History Review, no. 100 (2008): 155.

³⁰ Jasbir K. Puar, Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times, tenth anniversary expanded ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

³¹ Lars Jensen and Kristín Loftsdóttir, Exceptionalism (Milton Park: Routledge, 2022); Jens Bjerring-Hansen, Torben Jelsbak, and Anna Estera Mrozewicz, eds., Scandinavian Exceptionalisms: Culture, Society, Discourse, Berliner Beiträge

zur Skandinavistik 29 (Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut der Humboldt-Universität, 2021).

³² K. Jungar and S. Peltonen, "Acts of Homonationalism: Mapping Africa in the Swedish Media," Sexualities 20, no. 5\6 (2016): 715\37; Michael Nebeling Petersen, "'These Are Queer Times Indeed': En introduktion til homonationalisme i en dansk kontekst," Kvinder, Køn & Forskning 16, no. 4 (2016): 55\66.

³³ Petersen, "Somewhere," 59\98.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, la généalogie, l'histoire," in Hommage à Jean Hyppolite, Épiméthée (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1971), 145\72.

³⁵ David Garland, "What Is a 'History of the Present'? On Foucault's Genealogies and Their Critical Preconditions," Punishment & Society 16, no. 4 (October 2014): 372.

³⁶ Vilhjálmsón, "Into the Enclosure," 212\13.

³⁷ "Prestastefnusamþykkt um eyðni," Gerðir kirkjubings 18 (1987): 29, Tímarit.is.

³⁸ Jens Rydström, Odd Couples: A History of Gay Marriage in Scandinavia (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2011), 50\68.

³⁹ Sigurður J. Grétarsson, Skýrsla nefndar um málefni samkynhneigðra (Reykjavík: Forsætisráðuneytið, 1994); Jónína Þorsteinsdóttir and Ólafur Oddur Jónsson, Samkynhneigð og kirkja (Reykjavík: Þjóðkirkjan, 1996).

⁴⁰ Vilhjálmsón, "Into the Enclosure," 215\16.

⁴¹ Hafsteinsdóttir, "Foreign Contamination."

⁴² Þorsteinsdóttir and Jónsson, Samkynhneigð og kirkja, 20\21, 35, 66; Grétarsson, Skýrsla nefndar um málefni samkynhneigðra, 16.

⁴³ Vilhjálmsson, "Into the Enclosure," 214\17.

⁴⁴ Ólafur Skúlason, "Til félagsmálanefnd Alþingis," Alþingi, 6 May 1992, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/erindi/115/115-1200.pdf>; Ólafur Skúlason, "Umsögn um frumvarp til laga um staðfesta samvist," Alþingi, 22 April 1996, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/erindi/120/120-1656.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Rydström, Odd Couples, 58\59.

⁴⁶ G. H. S., "Eðlilegt framhald á margra ára ástarsambandi," DV, 22 June 1996, 10, Tímarit.is; Þorsteinn Gunnarsson, "Það þarf kjark til að lifa lífinu," Fréttir, 14 November 1996, 10\11, Tímarit.is; S.dór, "Fjöldi para hyggst taka borgaralega vígslu," DV, 8 June 1996, 64, Tímarit.is; "Embættismenn segja eins og aular að við megum ekki eiga börn!," Helgarpósturinn, 18 January 1996, 22\23, Tímarit.is.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, "2: Utangarðs í eigin giftingu," Ein saga eitt skref, 2022, <https://www.einsagaeittskref.is/>.

⁴⁸ Anonymous.

⁴⁹ Bergþóra Njál's Guðmundsdóttir, "Hvers kyns hjón," Tímarit Morgunblaðsins, 29 January 2006, 17, Tímarit.is.

⁵⁰ On the 1996 report, see Þorsteinsdóttir and Jónsson, Samkynhneigð og kirkja, 71.

⁵¹ "Þjóðkirkjan og staðfest samvist," Gerðir kirkjubings 37 (2006): 102, Tímarit.is; Hanna María Karlsdóttir and Sigurborg Daðadóttir, "Viðtal tekið fyrir verkefnið Svona fólk," interview by Steingrímur Sævar Ólafsson, Svona fólk, 1997, transcript, 4, <http://svonafolk.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Hanna-og-Bogga.pdf>.

⁵² Karlsdóttir and Daðadóttir, "Viðtal tekið fyrir verkefnið Svona fólk," 4\5.

⁵³ Svona fólk, episode 4, "Annars flokks," directed by Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, aired 30 September 2019 on RÚV, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/svonafolkseria/363633510>.

⁵⁴ Karlsdóttir and Daðadóttir, "Viðtal tekið fyrir verkefnið Svona fólk," 8.

⁵⁵ A note on Icelandic names. The traditional Icelandic naming system is patronymic, meaning that there are no surnames. Referring to an Icelander solely by patronym is incorrect, as this merely tells us the name of that Icelander's father (or, increasingly, mother). A traditionally named Icelander is referred to either with both given name(s) and patronymic or, when context allows, with given name(s) only.

⁵⁶ Margrét Pála Ólafsdóttir, "Viðtal tekið fyrir verkefnið Svona fólk," interview by Steingrímur Sævar Ólafsson, Svona

fólk, 1997, transcript, 22, http://svonafolk.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Margre%CC%81t-Pa%CC%81la-O%CC%81lafsd%CC%81ttir-1997_NET.pdf.

⁵⁷ "Embættismenn segja eins og aular að við megum ekki eiga börn!," Helgarpósturinn, 18 January 1996, 22\–23, Tímarit.is.

⁵⁸ Foucault, The Birth of Biopolitics, 131\–33.

⁵⁹ John Witte, "The Mother of All Earthly Laws: The Lutheran Reformation of Marriage," Gettysburg Seminary Ridge Review 15, no. 2 (2013): 26\–43.

⁶⁰ "Lög um stöðu, stjórn og starfshætti þjóðkirkjunnar," Alþingi, 26 May 1997, <https://www.althingi.is/lagas/149b/1997078.html>.

⁶¹ Kühle, "Religion and State."

⁶² On the clergy's disagreement, see Bóasdóttir, "Same-Sex Marriage," 111\–14.

⁶³ Karl Sigurbjörnsson, Í birtu náðarinnar: Hirðisbréf til íslensku kirkjunnar (Reykjavík: Skálholtsútgáfan, 2001), 16\–17.

⁶⁴ Sigurbjörnsson, 82, 158.

⁶⁵ Sigurbjörnsson, 159\–61, 163\–64.

⁶⁶ Karl Sigurbjörnsson, "Nýárspredikun biskups Íslands, Karls Sigurbjörnssonar," Morgunblaðið, 2 January 2006, 21, Tímarit.is; Arna Schram, "Hvað er hjónaband?," Morgunblaðið, 4 January 2006, 8, Tímarit.is.

⁶⁷ Karl Sigurbjörnsson, "Umsögn um frumvarp um breyting á ýmsum lagaákvæðum sem varða réttindi samkyhneigðra," *Alþingi*, 18 January 2008, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/erindi/135/135-1057.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Kristján Valur Ingólfsson, "Um hjónabandið," *Morgunblaðið*, 11 February 2006, 43, Tímarit.is; Kristján Valur Ingólfsson, "Hjúskaparlögin og handbók þjóðkirkjunnar," *Alþingi*, 12 February 2006, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/erindi/132/132-1125.pdf>; Kristján Björnsson, "Alþingi sniðgangi ekki kirkjuna," *Fréttablaðið*, 13 January 2006, 26, Tímarit.is; Karl Sigurbjörnsson, "Umsögn biskups Íslands um frumvarp um réttarstöðu samkyhneigðra," *Alþingi*, 13 January 2006, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/erindi/132/132-644.pdf>.

⁶⁹ A similar argument was made in the rest of the Nordics as well; see Jonas Lindberg, "Renegotiating the Role of Majority Churches in Nordic Parliamentary Debates on Same-Sex Unions," *Journal of Church and State* 58, no. 1 (March 2016): 80-97.

⁷⁰ Guðrún Ögmundsdóttir, "Viðtal tekið fyrir verkefnið Svona fólk," interview by Hrafnhildur Gunnarsdóttir, *Svona fólk*, 2006, transcript, 6-10, <http://svonafolk.is/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Gu%C3%B0r%C3%BAn-%C3%96gmundsd%C3%B3ttir-2006.pdf>.

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⁷³ Katrín Fjeldsted, "Staðfest samvist," Alþingi, 3 June 1996, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/120/06/r03191839.shtml>; "Staðfest samvist," Alþingi, 1996, <https://www.althingi.is/thingstorf/thingmalalistar-efthingum/ferill/?ltg=120&mnr=320>.

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⁷⁵ Nefnd um réttarstöðu samkynhneigðra, Skýrsla um réttarstöðu samkynhneigðra (Reykjavík: Forsætisráðuneytið, August 2004), 37\–53, 55, 80\–81, https://www.stjornarradid.is/media/forsaetisraduneyti-media/media/Skyrslur/Rettarstada_samkynhneigdra.pdf.

⁷⁶ Rydström, Odd Couples, 149.

⁷⁷ Ásgrímsson, "Réttarstaða samkynhneigðra"; Steingrímur J. Sigfússon, "Réttarstaða samkynhneigðra," Alþingi, 22 November 2005, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/132/11/r22182540.shtml>; Ásta Möller, "Réttarstaða samkynhneigðra," Alþingi, 22 November 2005,

<https://www.althingi.is/altext/132/11/r22175145.shtml>; Bryndís Haraldsdóttir, "Réttarstaða samkynhneigðra," Alþingi, 22 November 2005, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/132/11/r22180855.shtml>.

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⁸² Sigtryggur Ari Jóhannsson, "Sundrung vofir yfir," DV, 16 October 2007, 8, Tímarit.is.

⁸³ Guðmundsdóttir, "Hvers kyns hjón," 17.

⁸⁴ "Þjóðkirkjan samþykkir að mismuna samkynhneigðum áfram," DV, 27 April 2007, 38\–39, Tímarit.is.

⁸⁵ "Þjóðkirkjan jafnar hlut samkynhneigðra," Fréttablaðið, 23 October 2007, 2, Tímarit.is.

⁸⁶ "Þjóðkirkjan samþykkir að mismuna samkynhneigðum áfram."

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⁸⁸ Ragna Árnadóttir, "Hjúskaparlög, staðfest samvist o.fl.," Alþingi, 25 March 2010, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/138/03/r25140311.shtml>.

⁸⁹ Höskuldur Þórhallsson, "Hjúskaparlög, staðfest samvist o.fl.," Alþingi, 9 June 2010, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/138/06/r09213407.shtml>.

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⁹¹ Out of all the Nordic countries' parliamentary debates about marriage equality, Iceland's was the most focused on the national church, which was mentioned in 48 percent of the speeches. See Lindberg, "Renegotiating the Role."

⁹² Sigmundur Ernir Rúnarsson, "Hjúskaparlög, staðfest samvist o.fl.," Alþingi, 25 March 2010, <https://www.althingi.is/altext/138/03/r25142228.shtml>.

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⁹⁹ Kristjana Björg Guðbrandsdóttir, "Flestir gifta samkynhneigða með ánægju," *Fréttablaðið*, 3 October 2015, 38, Tímarit.is.

¹⁰⁰ "Synji ekki samkynja pörum."