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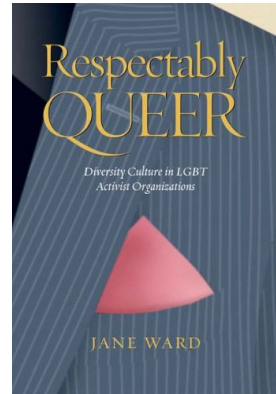
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Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations

Jane Ward

Vanderbilt University Press (2008)
ISBN 9780826516077 (178p)

Reviewed by: SAORI TAKAHASHI



In her book, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organizations*, Jane Ward discusses issues of professionalization, dissemination and commodification of diversity values which represent the neoliberal ideology. She also points out that the ideology (the idea that manipulates race, class, and gender diversity to improve corporations' public image and expand their markets by professional organizational skills) permeates the broad cultural settings – especially in LGBT organizations. Ward conducted her exploratory field research at the three Los Angeles-based multicultural LGBT organizations: Christopher Street West (CSW), the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, and *Bienestar* (which translates to “well being” in English). Through participatory and longitudinal close observation of the given organizations, she attempts to answer the question: “(w) hat, if anything, is still ‘queer’ about queer approaches to difference?”, against the neoliberal identity politics (P 149). Ward’s keen insight from the intersectional angle and field research findings reveal that even LGBT organizations and their management, which are supposed to protect the rights of minorities, become producers of neoliberal identity politics and the institutional exclusion of minorities. Finally, she successfully problematizes static identity categories by blending “queerness” into intersectional theory.

Ward’s critical perspective is positioned in the concept of intersectionality, which is conceptualized as “a non-additive conception of identities that sees systems of domination as interdefining one another” (p. 30). Intersectionality denounces current and historical diversity discourses, and neoliberal identity politics, including those residing in feminism, by criticizing “the notion of universal identity categories, or the idea that resistance efforts can be organized around universal, singular identity claims” (p. 35). Moreover, Ward also denounces the failure of multi-identity coalitions among gay and other grassroots activists due to their inclination to these diversity discourses, which ultimately fails to include people fall into the intersections of the universal identities. Therefore, the book challenges the apathy and incomplete inclusiveness of dominant feminist

politics as well as dominant gay cultural politics that are taking organized diversity discourse for granted. Ward's understanding of "queerness", "a political metaphor without fixed referent" (p. 3), follows the arguments made by queer theorists who also problematize of identity politics, commodification, institutionalization, and hetero- and homo- normativities in the broader society, such as those of Jose Esteban Muñoz and Judith Butler. In other words, these queer theorists argue that these normative discourses and systems represent and recreate static identity categories while defining who are included in the representative identity categories (see also Butler 1999, Muñoz 1999). Ward synthesizes their ideas into her argument that identity is not something static but fluid and an ongoing process. Ward states, "I wish to preserve the distinctiveness of 'queer' as a mode of intersectional critique" (p. 4), and shows her intention to connect intersectionality and queer studies into her argument's theoretical framework.

The application of a theoretical framework of queer politics into intersectionality is one of the biggest accomplishments of Ward's book. Not only race and gender are taken into account to capture the fluidity of identity, but she incorporates a queer perspective to challenge social norms that put people into static identity categories. All of her empirical research on the three organizations, Christopher Street West, the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, and Bienestar, clearly shows her aim to problematize fixed multiple identities and to explain how neoliberal identity politics play the role of the proliferation of fixed identity categorization. Ward clearly builds up her analytical framework, "queer" intersectionality, to disclose the corporal identity politics haunting queer organizations.

Ward's research at Christopher Street West (CSW) gives a good example of the failure to create an inclusive queer community by transforming CSW into professionalized corporal institution. Describing the resistance of original working-class grassroots organizers against corporate and professional management specialists, Ward also critiques working-class managers for ignoring the inclusiveness on their own board as well as at their annual event. Ward describes how working-class board members do not notice the importance of diversity within the queer community and that they coordinate the pride festival as just a fun activity, exclusively attended by a gay male population. It is also apparent that female representation in the original grass-roots board is non-existent. Despite the hope to fix CSW's exclusiveness, the new professional board members' taking over the old board also failed to support the diversity of the queer community. Most importantly, Ward laments that many criticisms on CSW's lack of diversity are due to the new board members –many of them are professional white gay males who "promote the image of monogamy, domesticity, and prosperity" (p. 60). Professionalization of the CSW ultimately represents the white middle class homonormativity. It undermines queer diversity, which is rooted in challenges to the middle class by queer subculture, spontaneity and perceived vulgarity.

Ward moves on to illustrate issues within the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, where a profitable diversity planning strategy is deeply embedded in its "diversity

obsessed” management (p. 139). At the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, diversity is seen as one of the strategies to show its dedication to the center’s corporate social responsibility. Ward’s analysis centers on the Center’s “Diversity Day”, when they carry out the “diversity embracement” employee training. Ward notes how the training reproduces white racial normativity. Presenting comments from employees of color who participated in the training, Ward reveals their frustration with the organization’s discursive attitude toward diversity as coached at ‘The Center.’ “Just doing it”, a comment from a participant, refers to the center’s automatic equation of inclusive diversity and hiring people of color, and the management is described as “too slow, too bureaucratic” (p. 139). Ward critiques the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center’s leaders for endlessly discussing and trying to reflect the demographic statistics to make the organization look diversity-friendly. Although Ward appreciates the organization’s effort to embrace the diverse population in the organizational management and programs, the organization, in Ward’s view, certainly has not yet abandoned a “Gay Inc.” ideology, in which diversity is considered a strategy of financial profit (p. 82).

Lastly, Ward studied *Bienestar* and the organization’s exclusion of Latina lesbians. Originally started as a gay and lesbian Latino community organization, the organization *Bienestar* is still serving as a place of community and support for gays and lesbians. However, Ward’s denounces *Bienestar* by prioritizing the HIV/AIDS programs over other less popular female specific health issues such as breast cancer in order to serve better for major donors who are gay males. While maintaining the role of a secure place for gay and lesbian Latinos in Los Angeles, the need to prioritize the fundraising issues brings the notion of professionalization to the organization. In addition, the exclusively gay male dominant work environment of the organization makes it difficult for female workers to voice their concerns regarding the exclusion of females. Ward, in the end, concludes that they commercialized the HIV-focused program because of its urgency and fundability and reveals female health issues are easily swept away by the difficulty to collect support on lesbian specific issues under the sustained male dominance of the organizational management.

Ward’s observation from an intersectional angle makes it possible to reevaluate the inclusiveness of the queer community and to undermine the professionalization and neoliberal identity politics embedded in these grassroots organizations. Ward deserves a great compliment because of her implementation of intersectionality into an empirical evaluation of the queer activists’ spaces and organizations. Ward’s argument is useful to tackle identity politics, not only of the gay and lesbian organizations, but also of the other charitable organizations that are misguided by neoliberal identity politics and profitable diversity strategies. In doing so, she successfully illustrates the negative effects of the professionalization of charitable organizations.

Although this is an exceptional book, I have a relatively minor critique of her argument, specifically in some of her empirical research, which is worth noting. Ward’s writing on HIV/AIDS issues suggests that she is gendering illnesses, as

Ward admits the tendency of male interest specifically to focus on HIV/AIDS. Even though HIV concerns both females and males, her critique of *Bienestar* presupposes the illness is predominantly relevant to gay men. Moreover, in order to support a lesbian specific program, she suggests the incorporation of a breast cancer program (While men may face breast cancer to a lesser degree, HIV impacts many women too.) Thus, the chapter's tone sounds tame on assigning specific gender to certain illnesses. Although Ward acknowledges that "the intersectional approach has not challenged the gender binary itself or the system that produce and protect the baseline requirements for recognition as a female or male" (p. 43), her assigning a gender dichotomy to some illnesses may reproduce this binary as well.

In conclusion, *Respectably Queer: Diversity Culture in LGBT Activist Organization* examines the diversity culture of queer activists in Los Angeles and illustrates three LGBT organizations through the lens of intersectionality. Jane Ward's biggest achievement is to connect intersectionality with queerness. In Christopher Street West, it is envisioned that working class managers fail to include a diverse queer community. At the same time, new board members also reproduce white gay normativity when they join the board. Ward's second critique is focused on corporate diversity strategies of the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center, through which the center tries to market their diversity culture to gain support as a means to eventually seek donations, and write and win grants. The research on *Bienestar* reveals that gay male health issues are considered as urgent and popular, therefore, gender neutral and lesbian health issues are abandoned. Ward's overall accomplishment is that she problematizes neoliberal identity discourse through three empirical sites from which she evaluates the "queerness" of these activists' sites in Los Angeles. Thus, it would be best for the grassroots organizations to critically evaluate their approaches to identities by employing Ward's queer intersectional angle.

References

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