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LGBTIQ politics

True colors – What does Orlando mean?

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On 12 June 2016, Omar Mateen killed 49 people in the LGBTIQ nightclub Pulse in Orlando, during a LatinX theme night introduced by trans performers. The overwhelming majority of the victims were LatinX or Black.

Mateen claimed to be motivated by Islamic fundamentalism, but his statements showed only the most superficial understanding, in fact a crude ignorance, of the different Islamic fundamentalist currents. His earlier visits to the bar and his use of a gay meeting app has led some people to assume that he was gay himself, though there is nothing to confirm this - these facts might “merely” show that he was obsessed with gayness or that his crime was premeditated.

The Orlando killings are the worst massacre of LGBTIQ people in the West to date since the Second World War. They are also the deadliest shooting in the history of the US over that same period. In other words, the deadliest shooting in the last over 70 years of US history took the lives of LGBTIQ people of colour. It was an act of heteropatriarchy and racism.

I won't dwell on the attempts that are being made to use this massacre for racist, Islamophobic, reactionary and imperialist ends. Nor will I dwell on the fact that the killer is being seen as a representative of Islam, while white fascists who attack birth control clinics and kill members of parliament are considered “unstable lone wolves”. Other people have made these points better and at greater length than I can.

Instead I would like to discuss what Orlando means to us as LGBTIQ people, and what it will mean to us in the future.

First of all, there is a risk that Orlando will be whitewashed, as the Stonewall rebellion was whitewashed in the recently released film on it. You can bet that Hollywood will rush to produce a film on the Orlando tragedy, because this is apparently the way the US manages its collective traumas: by converting them into smooth, brutally homogenized collective history.

So it will be up to us as LGBTIQ people to preserve the truth about Orlando in our collective memory. We must remember that this wasn't a massacre of handsome young white men, but an attack on LGBTIQ people in all our diversity - and in great majority on Blacks and LatinXs. This is our collective responsibility.

It is also up to us to struggle within our LGBTIQ communities against the temptations of Islamophobia and racism. We must not allow this massacre to be constantly cited as an example of the greater virulence of homophobia among people with Muslim cultural backgrounds. For us in France, it's easy enough to remind people of the huge demonstrations sponsored by the Catholic Church opposing opening marriage to same-sex couples.

But what Orlando means to us goes deeper than this. It calls on us to remember what gathering places like Pulse mean for us.

It's all too common to portray the LGBTIQ community as a bunch of party animals, of people whose way of life is based on getting wasted, dancing and consuming: commodities, alcohol and sex.

And we're too noisy, too flamboyant, too decked out in feathers and glitter. Entertaining, maybe, but only in small

doses.

Some of us rebel against these cliches - and sometimes respond by succumbing to others. Some people's rejection of social practices that they don't identify with - which is their good right - too often ends up as a moralistic condemnation - and even as approval of repression.

So we have to remind people: being visible and audible, finding some human warmth, talking, laughing, drinking, dancing, hanging out - and yes, caring for one another and having sex - all of this is a direct response to the very nature of the oppression that we endure.

Our oppression consists precisely in having to be discreet and hidden, in solitary weeping and self-cutting and even suicide. Or some of us get killed by others, as in Orlando, but also as an everyday reality that strikes hundreds of us. Trans people especially pay a heavy tribute in blood.

Our oppression consists in having to constantly be on guard, to be on the lookout, to run the risk of being insulted, attacked, beaten up, raped, in the streets of these precious "free Western countries". In having to efface ourselves as best we can, to be invisible, to disappear.

So when we're among ourselves, enjoying some human warmth, in our spaces, we blossom, we burst out, we cut loose. And those of us who are bold enough carry this magnificence, this refusal to deny ourselves and efface ourselves, into the public eye, onto the streets and elsewhere.

That's why Orlando was the ultimate act of violence against us. We were killed in our own sanctuary, our own ghetto, that we had so painfully won. Orlando told us: you will never be safe, anywhere.

So what can we do?

As a community - as LGBTIQ people in the global North, and as a political movement - we have only two choices. We can give up, disperse, flee our safe havens and isolate ourselves. This would very probably mean even more suicides and a weakening of our collective solidarity. Or we have another choice, action: to strengthen our community and our movement.

For too long, we have been on the defensive. After the HIV/AIDS pandemic and our thousands of deaths, we have not been able to re-form our ranks. AIDS drew a line between the high-risk populations (gay men and trans people) and the rest of us. And sexism, racism and class differences have divided us as well. Nor have we had serious discussions about the political implications of the emergence of different gender identities over the last several years, about how we need to organize ourselves in response. Bisexuals are still stigmatized in our community. And different choices of political strategy - lobbying, support for politicians, street action, popular education, prevention - have drawn still more dividing lines between us.

Nevertheless, the great majority of us are still subjected to everyday terrorism. There is more to terrorism than just a man with a machine gun. Terrorism is also the insults and attacks that rain down on us, a permanent deluge that keeps us closeted. This homegrown terrorism - in cities and the countryside, on the TV and radio - this small, quiet, everyday terrorism is the main threat we face. It's this terrorism that isolates us from our LGBTIQ sisters and brothers, that creates a distance between us, when it should unite us.

So yes, faced with all this, our most urgent priority is to rebuild a strong community and a strong political movement.

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We need to go back to basics, and if necessary ask fundamental questions about our assumptions and our history. We need to accept the necessity of self-criticism. Develop respect and understanding for one another. Insist on solidarity between those among us who are most privileged and those among us who are least privileged - which sometimes means exposing ourselves to discomfort. We need to work together at local, national and international level to develop strategies and tools that will allow us to move forward together, without leaving a single one of us behind along the way.

Strengthening our community and our movement also means questioning the way we urge others to join us, and on the way we welcome them. There are so many of us! And yet so few of us show up at our spaces - why?

Here in the West we commonly pressurize one another to come out. Coming out is considered a founding act, it's a rite of passage that's part of our personal stories, and it's perceived as a decisive political act. Clearly we need to question this, and above all to question some people's tendency to insist on it as a universal imperative. We need, more than we have so far, to welcome people without demanding a public coming out. There are so many reasons why so many people still can't come out. And in fact, very few of us are 100% out (especially at work).

For those who do want to come out, we need to be with them along the way, giving them the time they need to truly be ready. At the same time we need to accept others who do not want to come out, helping them to be fully part of, and active in, the community. And we need to ask questions about how our groups function. Like any oppressed minority, we often work in small groups, even in big cities. Ties of affinity, friendship, love and sex are woven and broken among a limited number of people. In these conditions, tensions can spring up quickly. We need to bear in mind that despite everything, we are a family. A community. For many of us, our community is the only thing that stands between us and isolation and death. So let's be more welcoming, more empathetic, more self-aware and self-critical of our own privileges.

It's our love that makes us strong. It's not an easy love, not a love we can take for granted. It is nourished by everyday solidarity and by our shared pain. It is what enables us to survive.

Chloé Moindreau