Lizzy Handschy

Feeling Privilege: Queer Affects in Multi-Issue Social Justice Coalitions

My dissertation is ultimately an assertion that the work of social justice is both a deeply felt experience of seemingly mundane practices, and significant in shaping the subjectivities of activists. Specifically, I investigate how queer subjectivities motivate advocacy for non-queer-specific issues among queer policy advocates and community organizers in Portland, Maine. Through an extended ethnographic vignette describing my own participation in a coalition formed to maintain funding for social programs in the municipal budget, in this talk I explore the embodied experience of privilege within multi-issue social justice work. Within and across the organizations I worked with, my research participants were drawn together in multifaceted networks of affection and obligation, as they formed personal relationships and supported one another’s work. I argue that this form of coalition work produces awareness of one’s own structural privilege, such as racial, gender, or class, privilege, as one works on multiple political issues and alongside people with a variety of lived experiences. Because these communities of activists are fundamentally grounded in working and caring across difference, the affective experiences of this social justice work do not fit into sociological and anthropological notions of “collective identity” (Melucci 1989) or “communitas” (Turner 2011). Instead, this activism produces a “queer solidarity,” that includes conflicting affects, such as devotion and urgency, and is strongly felt not only in the physical space of the larger community, but also in individual and isolated moments and actions.