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# “The Loved Home” and Other Exclusionary Care Discourses A Multiscalar and Transnational Analysis of Heteroactivist Resistances to Gender and Sexual Rights in Sweden

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# **“The Loved Home” and Other Exclusionary Care Discourses: A Multiscalar and Transnational Analysis of Heteroactivist Resistances to Gender and Sexual Rights in Sweden**

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## **Abstract**

Based on a conceptualization of heteroactivism as a transnational phenomenon manifesting in local contexts to spread and express resistance to gender and sexual rights, this article aims to illuminate new dimensions of heteroactivism beyond a sole focus on gender and sexuality by bringing its specificities in the Swedish context to the fore. Drawing on digital ethnography with members of the neo-conservative, far-right thinktank Oikos and the ethnonationalist political party the Sweden Democrats (SD), the article shows how heteroactivist forms of resistance seek to reshape the state and the nation through the gender–sexuality nexus and how these resistances enter into negotiation with spatiohistorically established notions of gender equality and sexual rights. Through a multiscalar transnational approach, the article brings forth how heteroactivism connects several levels horizontally—from the local to the national and the transnational—and vertically and establishes linkages among gender, sexuality, the state and the nation. The analysis reveals how care, love and gratitude for the shared home are core elements used in heteroactivist negotiations, with contextually established notions of gender equality and sexual rights as national values. It also demonstrates how the home, which these actors seek to cherish and protect, takes shape as an exclusive and exclusionary space.

## Keywords

Heteroactivism, gender, sexuality, rights, Sweden

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## Introduction

Feminist and queer scholarships have developed significant analyses of anti-gender campaigns and far-right movements as well as the emergent changes related to struggles for rights and justice in various local sites across the globe (Schierup and Ålund 2011; Mulinari and Neergaard 2014; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Graff et al. 2019). In this article, I examine how the concept of heteroactivism allows us to bring more detail to existing understandings of resistance to gender and sexual rights. Influenced by Kath Browne and Catherine J Nash (2015; 2017; 2019/2020), I understand heteroactivism as a transnational phenomenon that appears in diverse, overlapping and distinct local manifestations. In this article I aim to illuminate new dimensions of heteroactivism beyond a sole focus on gender and sexuality by bringing the specificities of heteroactivism in the Swedish context to the fore. Based on digital ethnography with members of the neo-conservative, far-right thinktank Oikos and the ethnonationalist political party to which the thinktank is linked, the Sweden Democrats (SD), I argue that heteroactivism seeks to reshape the state and the nation by entering into negotiation with spatially–historically established notions of gender equality and sexual rights. I then connect these to notions of “the home,” the family, the nation and Western civilization and highlight the essentially exclusionary nature of this phenomenon.

While previous research has paid attention to how these new heteroactivist politics have shifted from violent or aggressive expression to more subtle resistances focusing on the “best interests of society and children” (Nash and Browne 2015, 4), my ethnography brings new insight into how heteroactivist projects are sustained through exclusionary discourses of love, care and protection of the purity and unity of “the home.” The notion of the home has been conceptualized in various ways by feminist and queer geographers. Whereas in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the home was theorized as a welcoming space, critical approaches later highlighted the home as a space of labor (Gregson 1994) and violence (Brickell 2012). Queer geography conceptualized the home as a heterosexualized space of alienation and rejection (Bell 1991; Valentine 1993; Johnston and Valentine 1995) but also as a safe space, offering protection from the hostility characterizing public worlds (Gorman-Murray 2006). In this paper I bring forth yet other dimensions of the multiple meanings of the home, showing how the home can be crafted as an exclusive space to be protected and treated with care. I recognize how notions of gratitude and concern are used to legitimize hierarchical social divisions and exclusionary agendas (Narayan 1995), as these enactments attempt to regulate the boundaries and core of the nation-state by demarcating a line between those who belong and those who do not belong through discourses of love. The novelty by which these actors frame their heteroactivist message through a rhetoric of care and concern rather than being violent or aggressive is important to recognize, as this has opened up a space that enables them to spread their homo/transphobic, misogynistic, racist and anti-Muslim ideas by reference to love and

gratitude and the right to free speech. To this end, I draw on postcolonial feminist theory to propose the need for more critical engagements with care discourses in feminist theorizations frequently taken for granted as intrinsically “good.”

The article is structured as follows. After presenting the theoretical framework, the research methodology and the material, I show how, at first, from a position of love and gratitude for the shared home, Oikos constructs the home through linkages between the family, the nation and Western civilization. I then show how the SD, in their attempts to redefine the boundaries and the core of the state and the nation, enter into negotiation with spatio-historically established notions around gender and sexuality. This is followed by an analysis of the exclusionary nature manifested in the discourses of care that lie at the heart of this project, highlighting the ambitions to protect and preserve the purity and unity of the home. Finally, I bring forth how transnational exchanges support and inform this heteroactivist agenda of exclusionary care discourses, national unity and strengthened national borders. I conclude the article by summarizing the main findings drawn and highlight for further research the fruitfulness of using a transnational, multi-scalar lens, as it is able to capture historical and contextual specificities while simultaneously grasping the transnational networks of which these mobilizations are a part.

### **Spatialities of Heteroactivism**

This article expands Browne and Nash’s conceptualization of heteroactivism as an ideology and set of practices exercised in transnational exchanges and local contexts. They describe heteroactivism as a form of resistance that seeks to place heteronormativity as superior to other sexual/gendered identities and is foundational to a “healthy and sustainable society” (2017, 646; 2019/2020). Such forms of activism can contain seemingly contradictory features, allowing for dual positionings in relation to women’s and LGBTI+ rights, as actors can simultaneously express homonormativity in support of women’s and gay rights mobilized against “Muslim others,” while emphasizing the significance of the heterosexual, nuclear family as the best for children and for creating good societies through which care for the family, society and the national community is exercised (Browne and Nash 2017, 650; 2019/2020). To disentangle the complexities involved in these enactments, I employ a multiscalar approach, attending to “how a multi-layered and intertwined series of material and imagined spaces are maintained and reworked through [...] everyday activities and practices” (Nash and Browne 2015, 564; see also Browne et al. 2018), which allows us to bring forth particular nuances in these seeming contradictory expressions, variously played out on subnational, national and transnational levels (Roy 2016).

By illuminating how heteroactivist forms of resistance attempt to reshape the state and the nation through understandings of gender and sexuality, I argue that these resistances locate gender and sexuality at the heart of the production of the nation in the Swedish context. I pay attention to how heteroactivism challenges historically established notions of gender equality and sexual rights in Sweden. By attending to these dynamics, I demonstrate the distinctness of heteroactivism in this context, highlight their exclusionary character and

propose the need for more research examining exclusionary discourses of love, care and protection.

Despite their place-based character, heteroactivisms are not limited to a place, whether local or national. Rather, they emerge in and circulate through transnational exchanges and networks, as such networks inform local resistance to women's and LGBTI+ rights in varied and overlapping ways (Nash and Browne 2015; Browne and Nash 2017). These transnational networks are composed of unstable and unexpected alliances, bringing together leftist actors with actors in the far-right movement, and Muslim practitioners of faith with Christian believers under a shared umbrella of neo-conservative ideology, united by a joint emphasis on normative heterosexual relationships and families as shaping the basis for a healthy society and community. In the context of my ethnography, this heteroactivist ideology was constituted by arguments for lifelong heterosexual marriage, nuclear family structures and anti-abortion positionings, together with an emphasis on the benefits of private ownership, a minimal state, global trade, and strong national borders. These linkages demonstrate an original aspect of heteroactivism not previously discussed in the literature. Moreover, as a significant avenue for future research, I highlight the apparent tensions inherent in their political programs, oscillating between references to a minimal state and private ownership and a strong state to protect and sustain strengthened national borders and social institutions. These dimensions illuminate the fruitfulness of paying attention to how heteroactivism moves beyond a more limited focus on gender and sexuality as social identities, as these actors seek to reshape the boundaries and the core of the nation by referring to gender and sexuality as shared values and national traditions.

In their conceptualization of heteroactivism, Nash and Browne highlight the framing of standpoints against women's or LGBTI+ rights not as homophobic but as "disputed theory" (2015, 573). Similar kinds of argumentation also appear in the context of my ethnography, as according to heteroactivist formulations, actors refer to struggles for equal rights as a result of certain theoretical schools that challenge and tear apart society. By doing so, these actors seek to situate their arguments for normative heterosexual relationships within more "authentic" or "genuine" concerns for society and the community, in contradistinction to allegedly speculative theoretical ideas, which are framed as a threat that will tear "us" apart.

### **Heteroactivism: Beyond Contemporary Anti-Gender and Far-Right Movements**

By bringing forth new understandings of heteroactivism as a transnationally circulating ideology and set of practices that manifest in local contexts, the paper contributes to several fields, including research on areas as diverse as far-right- and ethnonationalist movements and parties, transnational anti-gender movements, the home/domesticity within broader multiscale circuits and the methodological literature of researching social media. Heteroactivism differs from anti-gender, ethnonationalist and far-right movements because it presents a political program that is not 'anti-' or against women's or sexual rights and does not express itself through violent or hateful rhetoric or action but uses a language of care and protection. It shares with other movements a tactic of referring to feminism, anti-racism and

LGBTI+ movements as having gone “too far” and tearing apart society (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Graff and Korolczuk 2021) but simultaneously distinguishes from these movements by opening up an arena for action to spatially reshape the state and the nation. Encompassing the broad diversity in the agendas of anti-genderism, ethnonationalist and far-right movements, heteroactivism develops a political program that addresses gender, sexuality and race at once. As discussed in previous studies, far-right and ethnonational movements, including racist and fascist parties, operate through the “construction of racialized or ethnicized ‘Others’—the Muslim, the Roma, the black or the ‘Migrant’ in general—threatening the nation and the people” (Schierup et al. 2018, 1840). Anti-gender movements or campaigns, in turn, contest same-sex marriage and denounce gender ideology as an instrument “aimed at destroying the family” (Correia et al. 2018). Heteroactivist initiatives bring together these political programs, separated by the gender/sexuality and race axis within a program of ideas that draws on racial/ethnic and gender divides and notions of normative modes of gender and sexuality. Through the protection of the core (the people and the family) and the borders of the nation, heteroactivism seeks to regulate these boundaries by drawing a line between those who belong and those who do not. Bringing together seemingly distinct political ideas and a hybrid community of actors across diverse political positionings, heteroactivism does not emerge as a subaspect to anti-genderism or ethnonationalist and far-right movements but should rather be approached as a broad ideology, informing a set of practices that can be picked up and used by diversely positioned actors in various political movements with the ambition to renegotiate the core and the borders of the nation.

While heteroactivist forms of resistance advocate normative gender and sexual orders (Browne and Nash 2019/2020), their activities go beyond the sole focus on gender ideology. Heteroactivist actors are not limited in belonging to the religious right like many anti-gender movements (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Kuhar and Zobec 2017; Corrêa et al. 2018; Gunnarsson Payne 2020) but are composed of actors from different traditions of faith. Similarly, heteroactivist resistances include, but are not limited to, far-right actors and can gather supporters situated in political ideologies across the left and right spectrum, spanning political parties representing the state as well as civil society and lobby organizations or think tanks of various kinds. Browne and Nash have shown the need for more insight into the distinct shapes and forms of such diversified alliances (Nash and Browne 2105; Browne and Nash 2017; Browne et al. 2018). Because of the hybrid nature of heteroactivist networks, the article aims to provide a more detailed insight into the distinctive forms of resistance exercised by such unstable networks, especially in specific, locally embedded and transnational exchanges.

Homonationalist arguments can support heteroactivist exclusionary agendas by defending LGBTI+ people to mark a distance from “Muslim others” (Haritaworn 2015). These complex forms of resistance cannot be fully understood through research on anti-gender movements or far-right actors. While several researchers have highlighted how the significance of race legitimizes violent social divisions (Perry 2001; Blee 2007; Norocel 2010) across different places, including the Nordic region (Gullestad 2002; Tamas 2002; Keskinen 2009), as

increasingly does gender (Koroczuk and Graff 2018; Graff et al. 2019), we still lack a deeper understanding of how expressions of care and love can shape the foundations of an exclusionary political project. Scholarship has offered crucial insights into love relationships as “‘reproducing’ the race,” a sign of respectable femininity whose reproduction is linked to the reproduction of the national ideal (Ahmed 2014, 124). Scholars have also demonstrated how “‘caring’ racism” expresses gendered forms of racism by primarily female far-right politicians (Mulinari and Neergaard 2012, 17). The emergence of heteroactivism, locally and transnationally, incites the need to carefully attend to how such exclusionary movements operate, not primarily through being in opposition or against something but through discourses of gratitude and protection. A closer look at these enactments allows us to reach deeper understandings of how racial, gendered and sexual politics work to define boundaries of belonging and not belonging (Suchland 2018), this being an overlooked process in the literature.

Finally, research has primarily examined heteroactivist enactments through analyses situated in one national context, while less attention has been paid to the transnational circulation of these discourses (but see Nash and Browne 2015; Nash et al. 2021). If we acknowledge how heteroactivism connects several levels horizontally, from the local to the national and the transnational, as well as vertically, establishing linkages among gender, sexuality, the state and the nation, there is much to learn from attending to the multiscale nature of these projects and what they mean for the (re)construction of the nation-state, through local activities as well as transnational exchanges. In what follows, I make this acknowledgement, highlighting the complexities and nuances in the emergence of such transnational heteroactivist networks as they manifest at the local and transnational scales.

## Methodology

My analysis is based on data collected in 2019–20 through multi-sited (Marcus 1995) digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016) with actors connected to the neo-conservative thinktank Oikos and the ethnonationalist political party to which the think tank is connected, the SD. I analyzed data collected on social media (Twitter and YouTube) and developed a topic-based approach to the data that embraces spontaneity and openness to unpredictable turns of events (Hsu 2017), enabling me to follow linkages in the data as they unfold through attention to associations and connections between sites. Using an active, topic-based approach to social media, the model developed here also brings new insight into the growing methodological literature on social media research on how to conduct research on rapidly emergent phenomena (Urquhart and Vaast 2012; Pousti et al. 2013; Halaweh 2018). Guided by an interest in exploring how heteroactivist enactments and meanings enter into negotiation with spatiohistorically established notions of gender equality and sexual rights and how discourses of gender and sexuality are transfigured in heteroactivist attempts to reshape the state and the nation, I conducted a close reading of the material (Lukic and Sánchez Esinoza 2011). In this close reading, I focused on certain details in the material collected, such as words and phrases, paying attention to how these interact with established meanings. Using a multiscale

approach (Massey 1994; Roy 2016), I understand the “transnational,” the “national” and the “local” as relational concepts produced in and through a constitutive relationship with one another. I focus on overlaps and incoherences at different scales and between different localities, and examine how these enactments and meanings extend through transnational exchanges.

Data are drawn from postings on Twitter and YouTube since these were the social media platforms mainly used by the actors I studied. I also draw on postings on the official website of the SD and nationwide news media. From the late summer of 2019 to the early summer of 2020, I monitored the Twitter accounts of certain key members of the SD party. I followed members who expressed standpoints in relation to gender and sexuality, such as in relation to questions of abortion or the rainbow flag, which were topics of discussion among these actors during fall 2019. The topic-based approach of my ethnography allowed me to apply an in-flux engagement with debates as they evolved. If a debate emerged in relation to a proposition or political decision, I followed this debate more closely to trace connections between the actors involved and the standpoints taken. All the accounts I followed were publicly available. I took screenshots of postings related to questions of gender and sexual rights.

The social media ethnography was supplemented by tracking the news media. Daily, I followed two nationwide news channels online: *SVT Nyheter* and *Dagens Nyheter*. If any news published was related to the topic of heteroactivism involving either SD or Oikos, I followed up by looking at the social media platforms of separate individuals or groups. From mid-spring 2020, I began to follow postings on Twitter and YouTube related to Oikos and to actors connected to the thinktank in the transnational arena. Since Oikos did not have a separate Twitter account or YouTube channel at the time of my ethnography<sup>i</sup>, I searched for key words and followed hashtags, which allowed me to trace an emergent network. As I was interested in the connections between members of Oikos and other actors in transnational contexts, I took screenshots of Twitter postings in which members of Oikos appeared and of the contexts in which they were linked. Drawing on my topic-based approach, I structured the data collection thematically to follow certain threads or topics backwards (in time) and sideways (through retweets).

From this wider set of materials, the paper includes data focused on two events. First, I draw on Twitter posts and the SD's main website connected to a debate that emerged in relation to the decision to ban the pride flag in a Swedish municipality. Second, I draw on YouTube and Twitter posts tracing Oikos' transnational connections. Posts on Twitter and YouTube remain publicly available until the account holder erases them. This feature allowed me to move backward in time to access posts from spring 2019, which was the first time I could see a tweet with a picture of the founder of Oikos seating next to the president of New Direction at a dinner. Data were collected in both English and Swedish. Quotations of citations originally appearing in Swedish have been translated into English by me.



Oikos was launched in the spring of 2020. It was founded by Mattias Karlsson, a former group leader of SD who, in 2019, resigned from his post in the party to establish this thinktank and to “shape ideology,” as he describes it (YouTube, Agenda 2020)<sup>ii</sup>. While Oikos recognizes social change as a threat and refers to tradition and heritage as being in need of care and protection, Oikos brings together people from across religious traditions of faith and political ideologies. Allowing for an alliance between previously unexpected actors, Oikos appears to be a novel phenomenon that differs from a regular conservative movement. Its council of trustees brings together five men in addition to Karlsson: i) Naweed Khan, CEO of the EU-skeptic and conservative thinktank New Direction and a practicing Muslim; ii) Dan Korn, ethnologist, author and Rabbi; and iii) Asle Toje, researcher, conservative debater and member of the Norwegian Nobel Committee. He has an explicit anti-migration standpoint and argues that migration harms Norwegian culture; iv) Arvid Hallén, conservative debater and previous chairperson of the conservative student association Heimdal in Uppsala; and v) Malcolm Kyeyune, writer and former leftist politician who describes himself as a “social conservative Marxist” (Annebäck 2020). Beyond the all-male alliance, the diversity of its members supports previous findings that heteroactivism cannot be located solely within either the religious (Christian) or the right-wing spectrum (Nash and Browne 2015; Browne et al. 2018). Indeed, as the composition of the council of trustees in Oikos shows, heteroactivist groups encompass different traditions of faith (Muslim and Jewish) and ideologies (left- and right-wing) and develop ties across different political organizations, joined together by their shared belief in the significance of the normatively heterosexual nuclear family as best for children and as the recipe for protecting society and the national community.

SD is an ethnonationalist party with roots in neo-Nazi movements from the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 2010s, it has increased its popularity in government elections each year with an anti-migration agenda and a traditionalist, nationalist political message. In the last election before I conducted my ethnography, SD received 17.5% of the votes and with that became the third largest party in parliament (Valmyndigheten 2018). In opinion polls it has been the second most popular party. In some polls it has also received the same percentages as the largest party, the Social Democrats (DN 2019). Karlsson, the founder of Oikos, kept his seat in parliament and in the executive committee of SD but explains that the party leadership has given him “free hands” to shape a new conservative ideology in Sweden independent of “short-term party strategic interests” (Lönegård 2020). The think tank is inspired by like-minded conservative organizations in North America, the UK and Poland. It is not publicly known how they are funded, but Karlsson has acknowledged in interviews that he will accept financial support from SD “as long as the money is not conditioned [beyond our aims] but we can keep on building a conservative movement.” (YouTube, Agenda 2020)

### **Caring for the Shared Home: Linking the Family and the Nation with Western Civilization**

In early spring 2020, Oikos was launched to “promote conservative societal development, strengthen the knowledge about conservative ideology, facilitate conservative fusionism and stimulate vivid debate.”<sup>iii</sup> As a new type of national conservatism, Oikos

emerged in response to the historical struggles for women's and LGBTI+ rights and their recognition through state-based inclusion in legislation and institutionalized practices in the Swedish context. As of today, women's and LGBTI+ rights have been institutionalized on various levels in Swedish society and are broadly recognized as carrying the values of the nation (Siim and Borchorst 2010; Liinason 2018). According to Karlsson, the recent "renaissance of conservatism" in Sweden is rooted in a response to these historical developments, most notably to half a century of "Gramscian socialism" as Swedish society has gotten stuck in the ideas of the 1968 leftist, feminist, antiracist and sexual rights movements, which "challenge, change and tear apart society" (YouTube, Timbro 2020)<sup>iv</sup>. Referring to the historical ambitions of the Swedish welfare state to diminish socioeconomic inequalities and its current goal to strengthen gender and sexual equality, Karlsson, himself born in 1977, argues that today many feel this has gone too far and that they are about to lose something important: "a loved home" (YouTube, Timbro 2020).

*Oikos* is Greek for "the home," and among members of *Oikos*, the home works as a multiscalar concept, applicable on various levels, from the family as the smallest unit to the national community and even Western civilization as a larger spatial and temporal unit. As Karlsson explains, the project of *Oikos* is one of "upgrading western civilization and identity," holding that the heritage from "Rome, Athens, Jerusalem, the enlightenment" is very important and will become more important in the future (YouTube, Timbro 2020). The multiscalar conceptualization of the home—from the family and the nation to Western civilization—illustrates the multilevel nature and ambitions of this political project. On their agenda, free trade, a minimal state, private ownership, and a dual positioning on issues of women's and LGBT rights (supportive of them while also presenting them as threatening the unity of the home) emerge as populist dimensions, appealing to a broader group of financially wealthy, white and Westernized people.

In the Swedish context, the idea of the home and of caring for the home are salient for several reasons. In his well-known speech in 1928, Swedish prime minister Per Albin Hansson presented the so called "people's home" [*folkhemmet*] as a place where women and men complement each other: while women cared for the children and the home of the family, men protected the home of the people, the nation (Svenska tal 2012). Nonetheless, acknowledging the growing inequalities in child health and elderly care, Mulinari and Neergaard (2014) argue that caring was a promise that the welfare state failed to fulfil. As the state has sought to create conditions to provide equal care for all, care has been a central concept through the emergence of the Swedish welfare state across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, in debates about gender equality and the gender-segregated labor market, it has been highlighted that women still do the largest share of care work. Today, caring still creates significant "subject positions both for women (as caring mothers) and for men (as protectors and caring fathers of the nation)" (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014, 53)<sup>v</sup>.

Notably, rather than locating themselves in any anti-positioning against the rights of women or LGBTI+ people, *Oikos* frames its position as one of love and gratitude for the

common home and the unity of this home. According to Oikos, this is a standpoint taken in contrast to the challenges of feminist, antiracist, leftist and sexual rights movements to the “home” and how such movements tear apart society—dynamics which further illuminate how ideas of Sweden as a home are always gendered and sexualized (Kehl 2018; Strand and Kehl 2019; Wimark 2021a, 2021b). In addition, while Karlsson, in his capacity as spokesperson of Oikos, recognizes economic globalization as significant for the development of Swedish society, he simultaneously expresses an explicit critique of the cultural and social dimensions of globalization, explaining that these dynamics are about to destroy the inner life of society, the “social fabric and the community,” referring to, among other things, global LGBTI+/feminist movements touching down in Sweden (YouTube, Timbro 2020). The home of this community, which Oikos wants us to cherish and protect, is an exclusive and exclusionary space, characterized by gendered, classed, racialized and citizenship privilege.

### **The Role of Gender and Sexuality in (Re)Shaping the State and the Nation**

In a manner similar to Oikos, the Sweden Democrats (SD)—the ethnonationalist political party in Sweden—present political propositions about the family, gender and sexuality rooted in a desire to protect, care and seek the best for the national community and the nation.<sup>vi</sup> According to some commentators (Annebäck 2020), SD should be understood as the political branch of the thinktank Oikos, bringing intellectual ideas to political reality. Oscillating between homonationalism at the national level and heteroactivism in local contexts, SD produces an ambiguous mixture of allegedly progressive and conservative nationalism. To illustrate this, I examine the debate that took shape around the rainbow flag in a Swedish municipality in September 2019. At the nationwide level, SD expresses a homonationalist stance (Puar 2007) in relation to LGBTI+ rights, emphasizing the national value of LGBTI+ rights, which they position against an intolerant and foreign other. In their strategy, they draw a boundary between the construction of Swedishness, coded as progressive and LGBTI+-friendly, and its others, notably migrants and Muslims, defined by their foreignness, lack of tolerance and hatred toward sexual minorities. On their website, the party writes:

For a long time, Sweden has been a forerunner when it comes to openness and respect for differences. All should be treated equally despite sexual orientation and discrimination should be fought against. Many LGBT-people live under honorary oppression, where they experience limitations in living as they want to and the exposure to hate crimes with homophobic motives increases. It can be especially difficult for LGBT+-people who grow up in exposed areas and environments where foreign and reactionary cultures dominate and the influence of Swedish society is weak. The struggle against threats, violence, hate crimes and honorary culture is important to strengthen the position of LGBT-people. (May 3, 2020)<sup>vii</sup>

While at the national level the SD express such a homonationalist defense of LGBTI+ rights, in local contexts they have banned the pride flag, claiming it is a political symbol rather than the expression of a national value. This occurred in Sölvesborg, a municipality in the

southeast of Sweden with a strong representation of SD. They argued that the pride flag is “a political symbol” and that no political flags should be raised. “We should be strict and traditional,” one local SD politician said to SVT news (Hagman 2019). Only traditional flags, that is, the Swedish flag, were allowed to be raised on the town hall. In contrast to the homonationalist discourses promoted by SD at the national level, this local government engaged in a form of heteroactivism by uniting the national community under the allegedly non-political, traditional Swedish flag (Browne and Nash 2017, 651).

Offering a lens to analyze these seemingly contradictory positionings between homonationalism at the national level and heteroactivism at the local one, a multiscalar approach connecting gender and sexuality, the state and the nation brings forth how these positionings work to highlight and denigrate various perceived threats to the “shared home,” such as “Muslim others.” This way, homonationalism could be conceptualized as a tactic of heteroactivism to realize its vision of invoking and constructing a heteronormative and homogenous national community.

By constructing a chiasmic divide between national expressions as non-political (the Swedish flag), and political expressions as non-traditional (the rainbow flag) in the example above, SD uses gender and sexuality in their attempts to reshape our conceptualization of the nation-state. Through the demarcation of a boundary, same-sex relationships are presented not as part of tradition and national belonging but as political projects that threaten the natural unity of the home/nation, attempting to transform it. These features in SD’s program are kept together by the exclusionary character of the ideas of cohesion and community, rooted in care for, and protection of, the national, authentic, normatively heterosexual and non-Muslim (i.e., Christian) community. This way, heteroactivism attempts to reshape contemporary nation-states through a “sexual-gender nexus” in places where “state-based sexual and gender rights are seen to be ‘won’” (Browne et al. 2018, 3).

In the Swedish context, feminist and postcolonial scholars have shown how gender equality and LGBTI+ rights have taken shape as discourses that define and delimit national belonging by sustaining hierarchies and producing norms that “harbour many other norms regarding sexuality, whiteness, ablebodiedness and so on” (Martinsson et al. 2016, 52; see also Liinason and Meijer 2017). I suggest that heteroactivist resistance enters into negotiation with this national project and seeks to reshape it through appealing to ethnonational boundaries of belonging—the home—as an object of care and protection. Here, gender and sexuality, in terms of normative heterosexual relationships and gendered complementarity, play a key role in the construction of the national project, regulating its boundaries and future prospects. This is not a new phenomenon, and several scholars have shown how discourses around gender equality and sexual rights have worked to sustain power relations and hierarchies (Towns 2002; Mulinari et al. 2009). Yet, heteroactivist resistances seek to reshape these established discourses around gender and sexuality in new and distinct ways. The SD make use of a contemporary widespread recognition of women’s and LGBTI+ rights to single out “Muslim others” as a homophobic threat to these rights (Haritaworn 2015) while framing their own

arguments against the recognition of gender and sexual rights as based out of concern for the traditions of the nation, as if same-sex desires and relationships were a recent and artificial invention. Their political program is based on an ideology built around an exclusionary societal division “between those who belong and those who do not” (Mulinari and Neergaard 2012, 15), structured along axes of gender, sexuality and race/ethnicity through which they seek to regulate the boundaries and the core of the nation.

### Invoking Historical Roots and Discourses of Care

Upon the launch of Oikos in February 2020, Swedish Television published a video on YouTube where some members in Oikos’ council of trustees were interviewed, expressing standpoints against abortion and about the cherishing of the nuclear family and the fight against globalization, all with an emphasis on private ownership, a minimal state and strengthened nationalism. In the video, Karlsson explains their program:

The energy, creativity and passion are now with the conservatives, not the socialists. I think that large parts of our population have become sick of globalism and Marxist ideas. We need to act now to harvest this energy that is building up (YouTube, Agenda 2020).

This is elaborated further by Naweed Khan, a member of Oikos’ council of trustees, who explains:

It has never been more exciting to be part of conservative thinking. Conservative policies right now, whether it is here in Sweden, the UK or North America, conservative ideas are permeating through society. It’s where the youth are, it’s where the youth mobilization is. When Mattias and others wanted to create the first conservative think tank in Sweden for 100 years, I had to say yes (YouTube, Agenda 2020).

In May 2020, Oikos made one of their first public appearances with the opinion piece “The Crisis Shows the Need for More Conservatism” in *Svenska Dagbladet*, one of the largest newspapers in Sweden (Karlsson et al. 2020a). The article, which was signed by four members of Oikos’ council of trustees, uses the coronavirus pandemic to make a case for their conservative agenda. The authors write that the crisis has “strikingly shown that the globalist, postnational world order is a colossus on clay feet, since it does not build on authentic, recognized community and solidarity” and suggests that the current crisis has demonstrated that national communities are the strongest (Karlsson et al. 2020a).

In a follow-up article in the same newspaper (Karlsson et al. 2020b), the authors argue for the strengthening of the national state, civil society and the family, proposing an explicit standpoint against neoliberalism and arguing that human beings have deeper needs than “individual autonomy and material standard.” Influenced by right-wing libertarianism, they argue for a minimal state and private ownership. However, given that their program relies significantly on ideas of a strong state able to protect the national borders against cultural

globalism and migrants, to shape the external contours of caring for “our” deserving, and to minimize neoliberalism, these positionings manifest a tension at the heart of their political project, raising questions about their broader strategy and internal coherence.

In the YouTube video produced by Swedish Television, members of the council of trustees highlight lifelong marriage and a ban on abortion as key to individual wellbeing and a healthy society. On abortion, Naweed Khan says: “My view on abortion isn’t very different to others. If you are old enough to do the act, you are able to look after the results from it.” Furthermore, in relation to marriage, Atle Toje explains that “no single variable, including being in jail, using drugs, being born in poverty, gives you more negative prospects in life than that of your parents being divorced” (YouTube, Agenda 2020). Asserting lifelong marriage and a repudiation of abortion, members of Oikos juxtapose exclusionary heteronormative ideas of unity in marriage with ethnonationalist ideas of authentic unity and homogeneity of the people of a nation. By doing so, Oikos simultaneously invokes and re-narrates the ambitions of the people’s home to care for all. By referring to the common home, Oikos connects to the historical linkages of the people’s home, building a bridge to nostalgic ideas of a genuine, authentic “home” that cares for all and the historically established ambitions of the people’s home to diminish socioeconomic inequalities and, later, to strengthen gender and sexual rights (Tollin 2011).

These discussions highlight the need to problematize discourses of care beyond regular feminist approaches to care as intrinsically good, showing the various ways in which care discourses can also express other positionings that go beyond the acknowledgement of human needs and relationships. As postcolonial feminist scholars have shown, care discourses can enable actors to legitimize relations of power and allow them to construct themselves as superior (Narayan 1995). Care discourses can also be exclusionary, as the heteroactivist expressions of care in Oikos and SD above show. Tension appears in the shift from “care for all, to care ‘for our own’” (Mulinari and Neergaard 2014, 51), as these actors seek to reshape the project of the people’s home of caring for all and the home as a space of care to only care for those who deserve care. Building on Narayan’s definition (1995) of such forms of care as culturally racist, I would argue that care expressed in this way can also be framed as heteroactivist in its privileging of normative, heterosexual relationships, its opposition to the inclusion of LGBTI+ people and its attempts to protect and preserve the purity and unity of the home, the family and the nation.

### **Transnational Exchanges and Local Manifestations**

Although the message of Oikos and the SD is one of national unity and strengthened national borders, their ideas are inspired by transnational exchanges. While transnational exchanges are not new for SD, the novelty in Oikos’s exchanges is represented by its connections with actors who share their emphasis on the need to protect and care for the nation and society, as well as the central role of normative heterosexual relationships in exercising such care and protection. Expert commentators, such as Daniel Poohl,<sup>viii</sup> describe the launch of Oikos as a way to build an ideological platform and strengthen SD’s connections

to ultra- or neo-conservative intellectuals in a transnational arena (Annebäck 2020). Compared with SD's previous linkages with anti-Muslim organizations like Counter-jihad<sup>ix</sup>, this marks a new direction, as today, rather than being "against" something, Oikos is producing a narrative about preserving communal unity and what is best for such preservation.

One of the more prominent examples of how transnational relationships support and foster heteroactivist agendas is the collaboration between Karlsson/Oikos and the EU-skeptic conservative think tank New Direction. In what follows, I examine a series of tweets to illuminate their relationships, showing how New Direction appears as a connecting point between various conservative actors, shaping a transnational network united by the goal of building a neo-conservative movement in Europe and beyond. Members of this network share a deep-seated scepticism toward the state while upholding a strong belief in the national community and in the family as its core unit. These ideas are kept together by the man/woman divide of the normatively heterosexual and racially privileged relationship.

New Direction is an EU-skeptic thinktank established in 2010 that promotes a conservative movement across Europe and the globe. The president Tomasz Poreba is a leading figure in the Polish party Law and Justice (PiS, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and member of the European Parliament. In a tweet from the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Dinner of New Direction, held at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Belgium, Poreba writes that "2019 marks a decade of ground-breaking research, in which New Direction has shaped not only the political discussion in Europe but also the direction of the conservative movement around the world" (Tweet, see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Tweet from New Direction on July 2, 2019

In this tweet, Karlsson sits at the honorary table, appearing in the left front corner of the image (Figure 1). The president Tomasz Poreba sits next to him on the right. Both wear blue suits and have their faces turned to the camera. At the center point of the photo, across the table sits a man with white curly hair. That is Sir Roger Scruton, a well-known conservative philosopher who passed away in January 2020. For Karlsson, Scruton was a role model, so he invited him to give lectures for the SD and the forum Axess at least twice. In New Direction, Scruton is recognized as a “true pioneer of conservative thought and a real friend” (New Direction’s tweet on January 12, 2019). He was also the supervisor of Thierry Baudet, a Dutch right-wing extremist and founder of the Netherlands’s anti-immigration Forum for Democracy (FvD) party. In fall 2019, Baudet was invited to Sweden to give a lecture for the SD, and in spring 2019, Baudet was invited to New Direction. In a tweet on March 30, 2019, New Direction writes:

At the New Direction Academy dinner, listening to our great friend and partner Thierry Baudet @thierrybaudet about his success in the recent Dutch elections, and his next steps in making the intellectual and political case for a stronger conservative movement in Europe. (Tweet, see Figure 2)



Figure 2. Tweet from New Direction on March 30, 2019

At the same dinner, the Danish politician, representative of the Danish People’s Party and MEP, Morten Messerschmidt, gave a speech about “[...] the rule of law and the state of democracy in Europe, the notion of the national state and the value and worth of independent nations and peoples of Europe” (tweet, see Figure 3).





**Figure 3.** Tweet from New Direction, March 30, 2019

The tweets above reveal Oikos/Karlsson's presence in this transnational, conservative organization. However, Oikos also has a direct connection to New Direction through Naweed Khan, CEO of New Direction and a member of Oikos' council of trustees. International names not only give stronger legitimacy to Oikos but also facilitate the building of a strong network, including a group of actors broader than the relatively small heteroactivist and neo-conservative intellectual arena in Sweden (Annebäck 2020).

The members of Oikos recognize that the thinktank's name was inspired by Roger Scruton. Following Karlsson, Scruton had defined the roots of conservatism in terms of "finding a home, loving that home and preserving that home," and in the video produced by Swedish Television, Dan Korn, member of the council of trustees, agrees that the idea of Oikos as a home offers "a strong, uniting force." Among the members of Oikos, the notion of the home is given a broader meaning to include "a home for everyone and to share bonds" (Khan in SVT 2020). However, despite its strong emphasis on the nation-state as the object of care and protection, heteroactivist discourses cannot be conceptualized solely through the lens of the nation-state but should rather be conceptualized as relational formations that appear in local contexts in overlapping and varied ways (Nash and Browne 2015).

As the transnational sources of inspiration and exchanges discussed above show, transnational flows facilitate the circulation of "ideas, tactics, and support that are critical to fluctuating national and local oppositions to sexual and gender rights" (Browne and Nash 2019/2020, 76; see also Nash and Browne 2015). Being embedded in unstable yet dynamic networks, these transnational discourses and practices allow for exchanges and transformations of knowledge, norms and values across diverse forms of resistance, informing local heteroactivist resistances to women's and LGBTI+ rights and equalities.

## Concluding Discussion

Aiming to illuminate previously underexplored dimensions of heteroactivism, this article has moved beyond a sole focus on gender and sexuality to capture how spatiohistorically established notions of gender equality and sexual rights become targets of negotiation from heteroactivist actors. Recognizing how these forms of politics have shifted from earlier aggressive and violent expressions to more peaceful resistances focused on the best interests of society and children in present-day societies, I have illuminated how these actors employed a multiscalar understanding of the home to establish a connection among the family, the nation and Western civilization. Here, the home emerges as a space to be protected and sustained through expressions of love and gratitude, yet it simultaneously takes shape as an exclusionary space in which care is extended only to those who deserves it.

This article extends existing conceptualizations of heteroactivism beyond a limited focus on gender and sexuality, showing the usefulness of paying attention to how these actors interact with broader and spatiohistorically situated notions of gender and sexuality. This approach has enabled me to show that heteroactivist actors may carry an ideology with a broader goal than anti-gender movements. If anti-gender alliances share a common enemy in their focus on gender ideology as an instrument aimed at destroying the family (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), the examples discussed in this article show that heteroactivist actors might be more strongly driven by the ultimate ambition to protect the unity/purity of the nation and of Western civilization. Against the oppositional and violent rhetoric of anti-gender movements, the political program of heteroactivism is presented by an appeal to feelings of community, seeking to build attachments of love, gratitude and care. In their claims that women's and LGBTI+ rights have gone "too far," their positionings overlap with anti-gender movements as well as far-right and ethnonationalist movements, fueling anti-liberal discourses and sentiments (Corrêa et al. 2018) as they contrast their own genuine and authentic concerns for society and the community with feminism and queer theory, which are presented as speculative and careless. However, heteroactivist actors do not necessarily oppose the rights of women and LGBTI+ people; rather, they attempt to change the direction of the critique by suggesting that feminist and LGBTI+ actors pose a threat to the nation, wanting to tear "us" apart. I have shown how such discourses centred on home, care, love and gratitude, are core elements used in heteroactivist negotiations with contextually established notions of gender equality and sexual rights as national values, and I have argued that heteroactivism ultimately seeks to reshape the core (the family, the people) and the borders of the nation, an ambition that also stretches beyond the borders of the nation. To this end, I have highlighted the transnational nature of heteroactivism and proposed an approach to examining these exchanges by understanding them as relational formations that manifest locally in different and overlapping ways. Building on these insights, I want to conclude by proposing two directions for future research. First, I encourage a more critical engagement with multiple scales of analysis to capture the specific ways in which heteroactivist political projects use different tactics on distinct scales, as in the case analyzed in this article, where homonationalist values were presented at the national scale while homophobic practices were enacted locally. Second, I call for a more sustained engagement with the transnational dimension of these

practices which, despite their historical and contextual specificities, are part of broader, transnational networks.

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<sup>i</sup> In May 2020, a Twitter account called Tankesmedjan Oikos [Think-tank Oikos] was launched [https://mobile.twitter.com/oikos\\_org](https://mobile.twitter.com/oikos_org). Up to December 2020, the account had 1067 followers and 33 tweets had been posted. These tweets were not part of this analysis, since my data collection ended around the same time as the account was launched. Since September 2020 Oikos also has a Facebook account with 3648 followers (up to December 2020, see <https://www.facebook.com/TankesmedjanOikos/>) and a website (<https://oikos.se/>, accessed 17.0.2021)

<sup>ii</sup> YouTube, Agenda 2020 "Ny konservativ taneksmedja," Interview film created by SVT Agenda posted on YouTube 2/2 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M35Dlp9Y69k>, accessed 15.6.2020.

<sup>iii</sup> According to Wikipedia, conservative fusionism is a term shaped by a fusion between traditionalist and conservative ideas and right-wing libertarianism (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fusionism>). Quote Swedish in original: "Oikos är en nystartad, partipolitiskt obunden tankesmedja som syftar till att befrämja en konservativ samhällsutveckling, bidra till ökad kunskap om konservativ ideologi, verka för konservativ fusionism och stimulera till en mer livfull idédebatt," *Svenska Dagbladet* 25.5.2020.

<sup>iv</sup> YouTube, Timbro 2020, video taped conversation between Susanna Popova, Mattias Karlsson and PJ Anders Linder on the topic "Konservatismens betydelse idag. Mattias Karlsson (SD) Oikos." [The meaning of

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conservatism today. Mattias Karlsson (SD) Oikos"] March 3. The conversation was organized by the conservative think tank Timbro, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHC87x1F8B0>, accessed 15.6.2020.

<sup>v</sup> In their interview study with supporters of SD, Mulinari and Neergaard (2014: 53) also show that the party seeks to rebrand itself by focusing on care and detracting attention from their seemingly racist positions through a promotion of care as a "positive value" in contrast to "the negative value of racism."

<sup>vi</sup> SD finds the family to be the most important part of society. For a brief presentation of SD's family policy, see <https://sd.se/vad-vi-vill/familjepolitik/>, accessed 20.9.2020.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://sd.se/our-politics/hbt/>, accessed 20.6.2020

<sup>viii</sup> Daniel Poohl is a journalist and, since 2006, editor in chief for the antiracist Swedish magazine *Expo*. Poohl has published several books and newspaper articles about right wing extremism, see <https://expo.se/profil/daniel-poohl>, accessed 15.06.2020.

<sup>ix</sup> See, for example, this opinion piece from December 2011 on connections between the Sweden Democrats and the islamophobic network Counter-jihad: <https://www.svt.se/opinion/sa-nar-islamfientliga-counterjihad-anda-in-i-riksdagen>, accessed 15.6.2020.