# 3. Queer Well-Being

One of the most tenacious myths clinging to a specifically gay subculture is the conjecture that soi-disant pink dollars are going to continue growing on trees forever. For decades, a piece of misinformed capitalist gossip has prevailed, claiming that the facts of a general absence of kids, and couples consisting of two men, is going to leave a clear economic footprint—on the healthy state of people's bank balances. This turns belief in economic well-being into a chimera, not only of ascription, but also of self-attribution. What we deduce from this underscores the following insight:

> Luxury consumption is the mean by which gay male consumers identity themselves as group members, and therefore by their consumption they reinforce the fact that their identity and self-concept are shaped by the norms of the group. For that reason, group members associate themselves with the brands that their group consume, and have a connection with these specific brands in order to form the self that has the similar traits, preferences and qualities. The gay subculture can have a direct and strong impact on the individuals' brand attitude and choices. The greater the brand serves as a sort of an identification, the greater that gay male consumers [sic] as individuals are willing to consumer luxury brands.[1]

1 Hiba Dib and Lester W Johnson, "Gay Male Consumers Seeking Identity in Luxury Consumption: The Self-Concept," *International Journal of Business Marketing and Management (IJBMM)* 4, no. 2 (2019): 33.

This research reinforces the notion that gay men tend to purchase luxury goods as symbols of identity and status. The purchasing of consumer goods shapes one's own performance, i.e. how a personality represents themselves to the outside world, although it must be added that the plethora of goods available facilitates qualitative differences and individual standpoints. But is this enough to prove the pink dollar phenomenon exists?

For years, attempts have regularly been undertaken to throw light on the real economic situations of queer people groups. One meta-analysis conducted by the School of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), encompassing the whole of the USA, came to following conclusions: the income of heterosexual men came in above salary payments to gay colleagues carrying out the same professional activities. A higher percentage of trans people are unemployed than in the population as a whole, and those in paid employment have low average incomes. In general, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and trans-identifying people routinely continue to file complaints about discrimination in the workplace based on their gender or sexual identity.[2]

When this analysis is put side by side with current data from 2019 from the same institute, then we can conclude that nine percent of LGBT people in the USA were affected by unemployment, but only five percent of non-LGBT people. Moreover, twenty-five percent of LGBT people had to get by on an annual income of under $ 25,000, whereas the same fate befell only eighteen percent of non-LGBT people.[3] When we go into more detail, we see that:

> Gay and straight cisgender men at first appear to have similarly low (when compared to women) poverty rates, and bisexual cisgender men and transgender people have higher poverty rates than cisgender straight men. After accounting for differences in race, age, education,

2 See: M.V. Lee Badgett, Holning Lau, Brad Sears, and Deborah Ho, *Bias in the Workplace: Consistent Evidence of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Discrimination* (Los Angeles: UCLA, The Williams Institute, 2007), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5h3731xr.

3 See: Badgett et al., 4.

> and other relevant characteristics, gay men are indeed just as likely to be poor as cisgender straight men. In addition, the higher rates of poverty initially seen for bisexual men disappeared after accounting for their different characteristics compared to cisgender straight men. We find that transgender people consistently have the highest odds of being poor among all groups, even after accounting for their characteristics. Where people live matters for poverty rates. In particular, LGBT people are less likely to live in rural areas compared to cisgender straight people, but LGBT people living in rural areas have particularly high rates of poverty.[4]

It's possible to consolidate this picture by zooming in with the scholarly microscope onto specific subcategories:

> In most states, LGBT women have insufficient legal protections if they are fired or denied housing simply because of who they are or who they love. Additionally, when two women build a life together, they amplify the wage gap between men and women, resulting in lower income and higher rates of poverty. Transgender women, LGBT women of color, LGBT women raising children, and older LGBT women are especially vulnerable. Lack of legal recognition of LGBT women's families can mean higher taxes, lower retirement benefits, denial of family health insurance, inability to take family medical leave and more.[5]

On this evidence, the widely established narrative of a specifically queer variety of economic well-being does not stand scrutiny: the complete opposite is true for numerous queer, subcultural domains. The economic ascendancy of a white, heteronormative form of masculinity stands unbowed. The attraction some gay men feel toward luxury goods represents

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4 M. Badgett, S. Choi, and B.D. Wilson, B. D., *LGBT Poverty in the United States: A study of differences between sexual orientation and gender identity groups* (Los Angeles: Williams Institute, 2019), 27, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/37b617z8.

5 Movement Advancement Project and Center for American Progress, *Paying an unfair Price: The Financial Penalty for LGBT Women in America* (Denver: Center for American Progress, 2015), 44. https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/paying-an-unfair-price-lgbt-women.pdf.

an attempt at cultural appropriation, aimed at communicating images of well-being, within one's own circles and to the outside. In this process, economic well-being is transformed into a measurable unit, with which social valence can be obtained in interpersonal interaction—albeit only if the criterion in question is recognized. But this transformation distorts the concept of well-being, detaching it from its primary meaning:

> Economic well-being is defined as having present and future financial security. Present financial security includes the ability of individuals, families, and communities to consistently meet their basic needs (including food, housing, utilities, health care, transportation, education, child care, clothing, and paid taxes), and have control over their day-to-day finances. It also includes the ability to make economic choices and feel a sense of security, satisfaction, and personal fulfillment with one's personal finances and employment pursuits. Future financial security includes the ability to absorb financial shocks, meet financial goals, build financial assets, and maintain adequate income throughout the life-span.
> Economic well-being may be achieved by individuals, families, and communities through public policies that ensure the ability to build financial knowledge and skills, access to safe and affordable financial products and economic resources, and opportunities for generating income and asset-building. It occurs within a context of economic justice within which labor markets provide opportunities for secure full-employment with adequate compensation and benefits for all.[6]

It appears that queer interpretations of (economic) well-being prevailing in some places cannot be compared directly to the statistics of how the situation actually is, or to a pre-defined standard. But building a bridge to the queer past can offer some explanations:

> I have argued that lesbian and gay identity and communities are historically created, the result of process of capitalistic development

6 Council on Social Work Education, Working Definition of Economic Well-Being, https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Initiatives/Clearinghouse-for-Economic-Well-Being/Working-Definition-of-Economic-Well-Being.

> that has spanned many generations. A corollary of this argument is that we are not a fixed social minority composed for all time of a certain percentage of the population. There are more of us than one hundred years ago, more of us than forty years ago. And there may very well be more gay men and lesbians in the future. Claims made by gays and nongays that sexual orientation is fixed at an early age, that large numbers of visible gay men and lesbians in society, the media, and the schools will have no influence in sexual identities of the young, are wrong. Capitalism has created the material conditions for homosexuals' desire to express itself as a central component of some individuals' lives; now, our political movements are changing consciousness, creating the ideological conditions that make it easier for people to make that choices. … In this respect gay men and lesbians are well situated to play a special role. Already excluded from families as most of us are, we have had to create, for our survival, networks of support that do not depend on the bonds of blood or the license of a state, but that are freely chosen and nurtured.[7]

The historian John D'Emilios argues that forms of social relations out with traditional family-type constructs are a necessary alternative in order to survive socially, at least for some participants in the queer community.

An individual's economic autonomy functions as both existential foundation and base for the creation of free zones—free in interpersonal, cultural, and other senses of the word. This facilitation of sketches for one's own life encompasses particularly those personal spheres, which have previously been made taboo, or have been highly restricted at the very least, because of traditional, spiritual, or milieu-specific circumstances. It is hardly a surprise to reaffirm that this kind of autonomy makes it possible for individuals to dodge the rigid net of expectations, pertaining to particular social environments, which have often applied pressure to choices about gender, sexuality, and

7 John D'Emilio, "Capitalism and Gay Identity," in: Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin, *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 473ff.

relationship forms. This autonomy shoves this array of duties to the side, or even rejects them explicitly and entirely, in order to experience and enact a same-gender orientation, or to construct an unconventional lifestyle. The phenomena of financial well-being is able to break open the economic autonomy of conventional and compartmentalized social systems—including a family—but in no way releases the individual from the wish to be part of a community. The stride into the queer world can be motivated by desire, but also by the wish to be part of a community. This self-determined appropriation of a collective identity—of a queer community, for example—must be understood as part of an undeniable chain of actions, undertaken to evade being the threat of human isolation. Even when family-based organizations continue to exist into the twenty-first century—or are even reconstructed, for example in the form of LGBTIQ families—the lived, social model of queer individuality resists, nonetheless, dominant understandings of societal majorities. Or to express the matter differently: how many people are already lucky enough to be born into a queer family? The divergence between an individual's inbred habitat and the habitat that individual desires remains tangible, experiential, and visible, which is why move community alternatives, in all their manifold forms, are carried out.

That said, nobody, and no community, can create value-free spaces, emptied of all norms, clichés, and attributions. Every collective develops in its gatherings and group dynamic processes values and attitudes that seem appropriate to it: these shift over time, and occasionally seem to be arbitrary. What's more: many such norms are applied unreflectively, and yet establish themselves as subcultural standards. In this manner, the pink dollars myth has somehow got stuck inside queer communities' self-perceptions, and in how those out with the community perceive queer participants. The pink dollars myth is kept alive as both an ideal and as an attribution.

The causes of this complementary dynamic lie in aspirations towards personal satisfaction and recognition. Explicative approaches that go deeper are required to respond to the question of why queer (economic) well-being wants to experience itself prestigiously, in the form of luxury articles.

In raising this question, it's right to point out that investigations into satisfaction versus prosperity relations are hardly new. Many transnational unions, alliances, and associations gather data about income development within states, parallel to figures concerning the population's satisfaction. When these quantitative elicitations are combined with qualitative questionnaires, it becomes possible for those interpreting to draw conclusions. As is the case in the following analysis on the European Union's member states:

> Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that household income levels among those questionees is less important, regarding their satisfaction with their own financial situation, than the standard of living realized within their household structure. Consequently, one could assume that improved material living circumstances within the EU would result in satisfaction levels corresponding with the financial situation [at individual household level].[8]

Consequently, the convergence of material living conditions is a primary aspect in how individuals experience their own satisfaction. This convergence can match with an average value for society as a whole, or orient itself toward a subculturally defined ideal, in the form of a perceived or estimated median. We thus have options to select from to define lines of reference for an experienced prosperity, whereby, again, the social-cultural location makes its impact. To simplify: do the self-imposed reference values focus on statistical averages for the whole population, or on the queer community, or even exclusively on upper income sections in society? Dependent on whether the comparison is used in one's own interpretation of prosperity and satisfaction, the clearer the difference that manifests itself, in both positive and negative terms. Convergence towards an economic norm, and a norm of recognition, is subordinate to individual and subcultural parameters, which

8 Christoph Bernhard, "Wohlstand wichtiger als Einkommen für Zufriedenheit mit der finanziellen Situation: Untersuchungen zur Zufriedenheit mit der finanziellen Situation im europäischen Vergleich," *Informationsdienst Soziale Indikatoren (ISI)*, no. 26 (2001): 15, https://doi.org/10.15464/isi.26.2001.12-15.

do not have to be constructed exclusively according to the formats of a queer community. Instead, these can also reflect other dimensions of constructing references—including vocational training, nationality, or profession. Moreover, and depending on the situation, further lines of reference can be maintained. These include recognizing several subcultures, and/or the majority-based society with which subcultures seek psychological interaction. These individual referential values are transformable and changeable, and in no way rigidly fixed—although constant and internalized parameters, including minimum standards, can emerge.

It's precisely understandings of economic well-being that are co-determined by a range of social and cultural influences, and that are shaped by regional and milieu-specific factors. Codes that are able to express prosperity must be "written" in such a way that large numbers of observers can actually understand them as codes. The point of reference in question needs the immediate environment to identify it as such, so that it can then be refashioned as a form of recognition:

> The thesis defended here argues that the question of "prosperity" and a new kind of "progress" at the end of the neoliberal era, in all these and other arenas [discussed previously], is not purely a question of definition, which can be reduced down to an unbiased prioritization and balancing out of macroeconomic indicators. On the contrary, this is a question of power. Whoever triumphs in the debate on the question of how economic growth, prosperity, and progress should be defined and measured, wins concurrently interpretive sovereignty over which development paths, in the sense of both societal politics and national economics, should be pushed for, and which neglected.[9]

9 Matthias Ecke and Sebastian Petzold, "Die Vermessung des Fortschritts, Konkurrierende Strategien zur Verallgemeinerung widerstreitender Wachstumsverständnisse," in: *Wohlstand, Wachstum, Investitionen, Junge Wissenschaft für wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Fortschritt*, ed. René Bormann et al. (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012), 10n.

A socioeconomic perspective, as outlined here by Ecke and Petzold, relates prosperity to growth and progress. Such a method of looking at society as a whole can encompass macroeconomic dimensions anchored in neoliberal structures, although any extended perspective increasingly brings questions of power up to the surface, power questions that then seem more decisive for prosperity outcomes on personal and subcultural levels. Broad swathes of the population enjoying prosperity connect strongly to power mechanisms for redistributing wealth, and to the socio-political patronage of economic development opportunities. The collective invents and applies possibilities for distributing wealth—these can range from effective, to social, to rather limited and minimalist. Moreover, social networks in politics, culture, and above all the economy impact through personal alliances (based on favoritism) and favor, or even facilitate in the first place, individual economic successes. Both forms of prosperity, the collective and the individual, are subordinate in these processes to powerful everyday cultures, in which norms, standards, and ethics function as implicit, or sometimes even explicit, criteria of belonging. To concretize these criteria, gender, sexual orientation, skin color and many more factors are applied. This is a granting of status to specific forms of power, which, even when these are not comprehensible, at least must be recognized by the majority. This recognition of a powerful prosperity makes intense, playful usage of the myth of attainability. Additionally, it provides symbolic identifications. Some of these identifications can be acquired, and also facilitate detailed differentiations.

Although mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion result from these implications, it's possible to combat these, at least up to a certain point.

Along the paths described, the action interface of queer thinking on prosperity finds itself on the same normative playing field as other sub-communities. Engaging on this field leads inevitably to the emergence of forms of community-based recognition—or disdain—and to the creation of subcultural elites. Are then all subcultural communities subject to the same principle and in the same intensity, or are some really queerer? The dominant and neoliberal triangulation of prosperity, growth, and progress, in the sense of John D'Emilio's historical

treatment of the subject, is possibly anchored more profoundly in a specifically queer concept of prosperity. This becomes clearer when we consider the following exposition:

Personal growth toward autonomy, but also toward economic independence, requires a community development that can provide the individual with space and structures. Consequently, the will to work must be combined with the factual possibility of paid employment. Leaving the family unit, or even risking breaking with your family completely because of a queer identity, necessitates the existence of socioeconomic options and perspectives, particularly when the freely-chosen queer identity should be expressed in a publicly visible way, or at least not hidden. Such a change fuels the urge toward the individual freedom offered by individual economic growth, and with that, in a further step, the concurrent economic growth—seen from an overarching perspective—of a queer subculture. Of course, there have always been individuals who, despite hostile conditions in the politics of a given society, have been able to initiate an appropriate individualization: Oscar Wilde for example,[10] whose family and economic background was in no way average for his period. Yet it's precisely these individual examples that demonstrate that acquiring personal and subcultural prosperity must be understood as a socioeconomic law, utterly necessary for the formation of a visible and broad-based queerness. This strong connection between understanding prosperity and understanding personal growth has a special significance from a queer perspective: the imperative has been and continues to apply this connection. Queerness impacts people individually and independently from social, family, cultural, economic, national, or other factors.

The idea of progress, which manifests itself just as dominantly in a queer subculture, seems harder to pinpoint, but the following contribution helps us to do so:

> This ethical life, as an alternating form of the recognition of personal differences based on a shared understanding, of legal systems or of values, forms the identification foundation for the development of

10 Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life*, (London: Apollo, 2018).

> community-based solidarity. According to Honneth,[11] the formation of this solidarity depends on the degree of pluralization occurring in a socially defined value horizon, on the character of personality ideals recorded in the same, on the unbowed power of religious or metaphysical traditions, and on cultural forms of self-understanding. Regarding pluralistic society, Honneth identifies … a starting point for solidarity in the fact that subjects can obtain social recognition along the path of individual achievements appropriate to own self-realizations. Or put differently, each individual having the opportunity to achieve standing is a value that has established itself in pluralistic society. In practice however, the normative insight, that each of our fellow humans must have the chance to achieve social status, must be fought for time after time for specific but also changing groups of society's members. When a number of minorities, including, for example, the majority of immigrants—who live long-term with an inferior legal status—do not experience sufficient vindication, or even sufficient forms of integration based on them being valued socially, this can limit long-term the identification of these later, potential citizens with the population as a whole.[12]

Evidently, this explanation based on inferior legal status can be transferred onto the queer community's long history, which is why acquiring social status in this context—progress in the recognition of a particular majority-based perception of others—is of central importance. The progress referred to in this case applies primarily to a societal politics dimension that is constantly affecting the individual and their possibilities. In further consequence, this progress also encompasses sociocultural dimensions that manifest themselves in interpersonal forms of interaction. The recognition of queer individuals in specific milieus has happened, and continues to happen, far from the plane of legal equality

11 See: Axel Honneth, *Das Recht der Freiheit, Grundriss einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit,* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011).

12 Anita Horn, "Anerkennung und Freiheit, Subjekttheoretische Grundlagen einer Theorie demokratischer Sittlichkeit," *Archiv für Rechts- und Sozialphilosophie (ARSP)* 104 (2018): 38n. Last accessed March, 2021: https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-123911.

of opportunity, which is why both dimensions of this kind of progress are relevant. However, it's also possible that milieu-specific disadvantages continue to exist, and to exert a strong influence, even when legal equality for highly varied areas of queer life has been achieved.

Growth and progress are inherent components of a prosperity concept for queer communities. In many of their facets, they go beyond a single "moment" experienced through a whole society. Moving closer to the norm in the guise of prosperity has been a process which, for many subcultural, peripheral groups in the past, has proven itself a reliable vehicle. Concurrently, this image of prosperity must also be understand as a form of potential queer inversion. Recognizable areas for performance are provided for by conforming to social and cultural parameters that shape the whole of society, and by showing off symbols of prosperity.[13] This is as true for a general community as for a subcultural one.

This aspiration is motivated by the wish to move closer to the norm *and* the notion of an exclusive separation from members of one's own group. The idea is that the stigmatized kind of Being-Other ought to be reduced, while a form of self-representation that seems exclusive is reproduced. In so doing, the present realities of the queer economic situation, which have been researched regularly for years, is shoved into the background, enabling the pink dollars myth to live on, indomitable. If we now add to this dynamic the media image of the queer community, this chimera built out of wish and attribution appears perfect:

> If middle-class propriety is a condition of good queerness, how does the representational field of popular culture make room for worthy, sexual queers from nonprofessional and working-class circumstances? The answer is "infrequently" … That is a draining conclusion, however, if it means that queer class life has nowhere to go and nothing to do except to live with the limits dominance imposes, learning class rules from the cultural ether, and infusing that air with resignation in turn. What, alternately, might solidarity look and feel like? If it is true that

13 Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in: *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 313ff.

> cultural forms and everyday life are more connected than the fear of media influence communicates, it is also true that attachments to other kinds of narratives and characters matter.[14]

Yet media representations should not be interpreted as either constant throughout history, nor as all-encompassing truth. Instead, interventions on particular media, almost irrespective of their size, influence the dominant images that are communicated. Despite this caveat, cultural-historical residue from the past demonstrates a far-reaching degree of media consensus which, because of its dissemination, has developed a gravitas of significance that can only be overcome laboriously—and in this context, we need only think of the mass media depictions of queer communities during the last decades.[15]

Classic, queer economic well-being leans heavily on neoliberal, capitalist basic theses to provide orientation. Pursuing the goal of economic individualization—which stands for liberation in this case—several different feminist critiques of capitalism seem no longer to command majority appeal inside the postmodern and virtually interconnected queer community. The mechanisms of recognition, access to the "antechamber of power,"[16] and the possibility of participatory consumption have left deep marks behind them, which have been reaffirmed, and perhaps even reinforced, by the preponderant media image of recent decades.

Indeed, the present, queer pathos of emancipation seems to urgently require a move forward to a new stage, which is not only appropriate for the statistical, queer reality, and able to transfer this into self-confident political demands, but which can also direct itself towards those social movements in the twenty-first century that are socially critical. A

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14 Linda Henderson, *Love and Money, Queer, Class, and Cultural Production*, (New York: 2013), 50ff.

15 See: "Larry Gross, What Is Wrong with This Picture? Lesbian Women and Gay Men on Television," in: *QueerWords, Queer Images, Communication and the Construction of Homosexuality,* ed. R. Jeffrey Ringer (New York: NYU Press, 1994), 143ff.

16 Martin J. Gössl, *Schöne, queere Zeiten? Eine praxisbezogene Perspektive auf die Gender und Queer Studies* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 22.

comprehensive solidarity with queer communities from the most varied cultures, combined with a solidarity with other groups suffering under stigmatization and external labels would be just as essential and fruitful in this change of direction as integrating more strongly key global themes of societal politics: resource distribution and sustainability. The queer community has never been an island of interests unto itself, irrespective of where actors encounter the community, and in which cultural manifestation. It can ill afford to ignore the tumultuous seas engulfing it.

Queer prosperity is grounded in a community-based idea of prosperity, which must especially consider individual challenges and impasses, but also global ones. In facing up to this, the argument cannot be allowed to lead into an either-or situation, but must rather be understood as an intersectional moment. Sexual orientations and gender identities will continue to exert a strong influence on an individual biography, because even in the near future persecution, punishment, sentencing, and discrimination against queer people will continue to happen. And these threats are components of systems running through the whole of society, which is why a perspective is required that is both specific and holistic. From this perspective, it must matter how people consume or participate—exploitative labor conditions for a free, urban life, young people dropping out of school because of turbulent developments among children and teenagers, or an old age in poverty and isolation after years of political dislocations—all issues that acquire a different weight, when perceived from a queer perspective. This is why, as both microcosm and macrocosm, queer posterity must be thought about globally, comprehensively, and with solidarity. Such deliberations are prerequisites for leading queer successes on from the post-Stonewall, late twentieth century era, into the next stage. Just as vitally, this rethinking is needed to fuel innovation and developments in the twenty-first century.