

“Where Stonewall Never Happened”: Theorizing Queer in Central and Eastern Europe

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Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizelińska (eds.):
De-Centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives
(Farnham: Ashgate 2011, pp. 232.)

Quo vadis, queer theory, is the question one encounters frequently these days. In their edited collection *De-Centring Western Sexualities* two Polish scholars, Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizelińska, answer this question by returning to the problem raised already in the inaugural issue of *SQS* (1:1, 2006), namely the inbuilt biases of Western, or more precisely, US American, scholarship in lesbian and gay studies and queer theory. The critical perspective offered in their volume comes from the context of post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

Both the editors and the authors of the book are aware of the fact that most news about the situation of lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgendered people coming from CEE region – if such happen to be made available at all – are bad ones. The rampant homophobia, which is widespread not only among the common people in that region but just as likely is shored up by high-ranking politicians, resembles the attitudes prevalent in many Western countries during the grim 1950s – though just as well in some parts of United States even today. The editors, however, intensely question

the oversimplified reading of CEE therefore as lagging behind the given Western developmental trajectory of lesbian and gay movement and rights. Instead they want to complicate this story by showing how context, also the political and economic one, matters when it comes to living a life outside of heteronormative expectations. Therefore in the CEE countries there might exist phenomena, which fall outside the given theoretical frames, and hence need other tools in order to be made legible.

The editors make a good effort to shatter and rebuild reader’s assumptions about the CEE region, which has experienced a “tectonic restructuring” since 1989. They do that in particular by complicating the ideas about European time and space. How come, for example, that we don’t think of Germany as a post-communist European country? While doing that they are also able to give some (indispensable) remediation about the geo-spatial and geo-political context the individual texts explore in more details.

The volume can be divided into three parts. The first three chapters explore the specificities of the East/West divide and propose alternative readings and theorisations thereof, as well as introduce some Eastern phenomena which often escape the western eye all together. The next three chapters explore the situation of various CEE countries from the perspective of often transnational LG(BT)Q activism and politics, while the remaining four take a more intimate look at the private lives of queers in intensely heteronormative contexts.

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58

Queer Eye
Reviews

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In their joint article Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa point out several temporal disjunctions which constitute the skewed idea of contemporary peripheries. In their hands these, supposedly, backward peripheries reveal themselves as the constitutive other for the European West. Kulpa explores that idea more closely when focusing on the various ways in which the concepts of nation and sexuality are intertwined in quite particular ways in the CEE region. Here my personal favourite was his illuminating observation of post-communist drag queen transnationalism.

Instead of relying on the usual suspects when theorizing homophobia, in her article Jelisaveta Blagojević, takes up the idea of provincial mind, which Radomir Konstantinović had introduced already in 1969. Using that concept she is able to shed light to the role of homophobia in Serbian public discourses on EU integration, a feature that is by no means limited to Serbia only. The failure to show “the gesture of welcoming to the unknown” apparent in Serbia is also creating a particular disturbing pitfall in Romania. In the context of homophobic othering faced by gay and lesbian politics, the response of quite some LGBT activists is articulated in the form of othering and degrading Roma in turn, as Shannon Woodcock has observed.

Reading the article of Joanna Mizielińska gave me the necessary background for understanding how it was possible that, in Poland, an openly gay man, Robert Biedroń, and a well-known transgendered woman, Anna Grodzka, were, for the first time, able to win seats in the parliamentary elections in 2011. Mizielińska’s article points out the simultaneous existence and productive mixture of lesbian, gay and queer politics in that country, but also the crucial role of liberal heterosexual allies in the joint efforts of promoting LGBTQ politics, rights and visibility.

The joint article of Jon Binnie and Christian Klesse focuses on the discursive use of the concept solidarity in Poland in the context of

transnational activism around LGBTQ politics. The authors show how that historically laden word gets claimed and reclaimed in that particular context to create, depending on the user, exclusions, legitimacy, and both intergroup and transnational coalitions.

The article of Kateřina Nedbálková shifts the focus from macro politics to micro politics. She points out how in much of the Western scholarship same-sex families are self-evidently predestined to transform the institution of family as a gendered institution. However, in her fine-tuned article about gendered roles in lesbian relationships Nedbálková is able to demonstrate, based on the analyses of her interviews, how a critique of separate gender roles is strikingly absent in those Czech households in which lesbian couples are taking care of children.

Whereas Nedbálková does not give much of a historical context to her findings, the article of Sasha Roseneil and Mariya Stoilova, in contrast, gives a guided tour to the historical construction of the intimate citizenship regime reigning in Bulgaria. The authors list the many ways by which heterosexual couples have been privileged in the legislation, and how persistent heteronormativity makes it difficult to promote any protection from discrimination for the LGBT population. Reflecting upon the data from Eurobarometer they argue that the lack of legal protection in Bulgaria should not necessarily be read bluntly as a sign of homophobia, but rather as an indication how the whole idea of homophobia itself is still a novelty in a country which historically has lacked the challenge posed by LHBT mobilisation.

For his part Roman Kuhar takes a more critical stand on the ways in which homosexuality is not only considered as, but also forced to become, a private issue in Slovenia. The heteronormativity of the public sphere is maintained by violent attacks against perceived homosexuals, and those trying to come out are pushed back into closets. In his hands the ideas

of the Panopticon and a transparent closet function as powerful tools to describe how homosexuals are turned into strangers, who can choose to censor themselves, assimilate, or to become conscious outsiders.

One could argue that Alexander Lambevsk is actually following the emergence of conscious outsiders in his article about the micro level attitudinal changes in morals that have taken place over time in Macedonia within (presumed heterosexual) families and friendship circles. By following the narrative of “Emilija” he presents those gradual shifts in an emotional regime which are likely to pave way to the creation of alternative sexual cultures and macro level transformations in the future.

After finishing this fascinating book I had to pause and take a second look at Finland, a member state of EU since 1994. One could argue that Finland in many ways clearly belongs to the West. From the 1990s on it has taken a long step from a Nordic welfare state toward a neo-liberal market society, and currently it is the Finnish Commissioner for Economic and Financial Affairs, Olli Rehn, who is trying to prevent the union from economic collapse. In the 2012 presidential campaign the only openly gay candidate from the Green Party, Pekka Haavisto, has surprised the political commentators by entering the second round. However, at the same time, in the Finnish parliament, there is a persistent reluctance to open marriage to same-sex couples (and to replace the existing registered partnerships) as well as to advance adoption also for such couples. This reluctance sharply increased after the major electoral victory of True Finns in 2011, considering that True Finns is a nationalistic party infamous for its members anti-EU, xenophobic and homophobic views. Moreover, in the year 2010 Finland also witnessed its first planned violent gas attack against the annual Pride march in Helsinki. These contradictory developments make one think that scholarship done about queer topics in the CEE

could easily have some useful insights to offer also to the readers of the assumed West.

All in all the collection *De-Centring Western Sexualities* managed to provide a host of unpredictable angles and new information. While doing that it was also able to inspire some thrilling ideas to be incorporated in novel research projects – something most of the Western queer anthologies that evoke only the “been there, done that” sentiment fail to do. Hence I would suggest that you not just read the volume when you have time, but actually make time to read what Central and Eastern European perspectives could offer you in terms of revitalizing queer theory. And if you want to learn more about queer studies in CEE countries, remember to consult both the open access queer studies journal *InterAlia* at <http://www.interalia.org.pl/en/artykuly/homepage.htm>, and the collections of the Central and Eastern European Online Library at <http://www.ceeol.com/>.