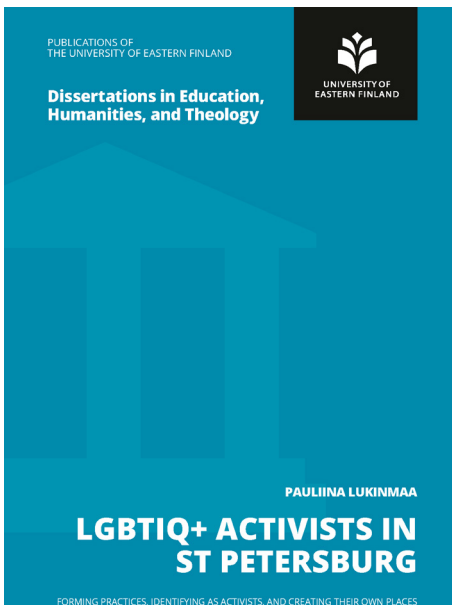


EXTERNAL RESISTANCES, INTERNAL DISAGREEMENTS: LGBTIQ+ ACTIVISM IN ST. PETERSBURG

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Pauliina Lukinmaa's doctoral thesis investigates LGBTIQ+ activism in St. Petersburg in the second half of the 2010s. During this period, Russia experienced a profound conservative turn at the level of state ideology. However, the authoritarian regime's attack on civil rights and freedoms triggered a reaction from civil society. Resisting newly imposed restrictions and aggressive promotion of traditional values, LGBTIQ+ activists became more active and

visible in the public sphere. This dialectic of power and resistance provides a broader context for Lukinmaa's research. Within this context, she focuses on analyzing the different tactics, forms of organization, and everyday realities of LGBTIQ+ activists in St. Petersburg.

Lukinmaa collected rich ethnographic data, which include observations, interviews and research diaries. Lukinmaa spent a considerable amount of time in St. Petersburg, between 2017–2019. She was familiar with the city and the local LGBTIQ+ scene from an earlier period as she had volunteered at one of the LGBT NGOs in Petersburg during her master's studies. In addition, she regularly visited the city between her studies and kept in touch with local activists. In other words, Lukinmaa achieved the "trust and intimacy" (124) with her research participants that is a must for any high-quality ethnographic research.

Lukinmaa builds a detailed, complex narrative centered on the perspective and everyday concerns of her research participants. For instance, she carefully explains how riding the subway is different from riding the tram or bus, and how this difference might affect LGBTIQ+ safety (260–261), and why the largest park in the city center, with almost no security, might be considered the most appropriate place for non-binary poets to meet on warm summer days (264–267). Such details help to better understand the lived and material reality of LGBTIQ+ activists, the reality that informs their personal as well as political concerns, decisions, and tactics. So when Lukinmaa presents someone's position, we can see the broader context from which that position emerged.

Another advantage of Lukinmaa's work is that it doesn't try to present a unified or universalized picture of LGBTIQ+ activism. Lukinmaa shows that even in one city, not to mention all of Russia, one can find a wide variety of LGBTIQ+ activists and activists. She uses the concept of rhizome to analyze LGBTIQ+ activism in St. Petersburg: a decentralized and constantly changing network of diverse actors who "do not agree on one goal for activism or operate under one idea of community" (170). Lukinmaa shows that activist projects not only take different organizational forms and engage in different activities, but they can also disagree and contradict each other, move in different or even opposite directions,

and do not necessarily see each other as being in the same boat of LGBTIQ+ activism. The detailed description of mutual disagreements and power dynamics among LGBTIQ+ activists in St. Petersburg is one of the core strengths of the study and an important contribution to the research literature in the field.

Lukinmaa also should be specifically praised for the way she approaches such sensitive issues as disagreements and conflicts within the scene. In each case, she gives voice to different groups and positions, using extensive quotes from interviews and going into detail to explain each perspective. In this way, Lukinmaa builds a balanced narrative that carefully discusses different positions and allows all voices to be heard equally. Moreover, by linking the views and evaluations of the research participants to their social, professional, and personal (gender, sexuality, ethnicity) backgrounds, Lukinmaa makes these views more understandable as rooted in both personal histories and the broader socio-political context.

However, Lukinmaa's research would have benefited from a more precise definition of LGBTIQ+ activism. Lukinmaa offers a rather broad definition of an LGBTIQ+ activist: anyone who "tries to change something in their environment in relation to LGBTIQ+ issues" (29). She groups actors within the activist scene into three larger categories: grassroots groups, NGOs, and influencers. However, given the definition of an activist, it remains unclear why only these groups were listed. Lukinmaa's definition of an activist could, for example, include academics or founders of LGBTIQ-friendly public spaces, like bars, clubs and other venues. These types of actors obviously "change something in their surroundings", and the changes they make might be as politically significant as those made by groups organizing queer poetry readings and the like. Especially since commercial LGBTIQ-friendly venues often serve as safe spaces and platforms for activists. Of course, one could argue that bars and clubs, unlike poetry readings, have commercial goals. But so do (some) influencers (see Semenzin 2022). NGOs are not profit-oriented, but their activities are very much dependent on funding, and some scholars suggest that they also function according to neoliberal market logic (INCITE! 2007).

Lukinmaa rightly points out that the internet and digital platforms play an important role within the LGBTIQ+ activist scene. She analyzed various online materials for her research, but a more thorough analysis of the mediated dimension of LGBTIQ+ activism is needed. Such an analysis would have been especially beneficial with regard to influencers. However, in this thesis Lukinmaa's research of this group of actors is mostly based on interviews and does not include much of online sources. Given the important role of online spaces especially for authoritarian contexts, such as Russia, Lukinmaa's research as a whole would have benefitted from a more extensive use of online materials, and it would significantly enrich the understanding of influencers in particular.

My final comment concerns the concept of a rhizome and its applicability to the LGBTIQ+ activist scene in St. Petersburg. Lukinmaa conceptualizes the LGBTIQ+ movement as a rhizome in order to highlight its following characteristics: 1) it is in a constant state of change, 2) it spreads and forms multidimensionally, 3) its actors in different networks use different tactics and strategies, 4) activists do not agree on one goal of activism or operate under one idea of community. I would argue that the concept of rhizome, as used in the thesis, highlights some characteristics of the LGBTIQ+ scene but obscures others.

As mentioned earlier, Lukinmaa shows that there is a lot of disagreement within the community. Actors may have not only different, but contradictory goals. Things that some members of the community see as an achievement, such as public visibility, may be seen as harmful by others. Instead of cooperation, different LGBTIQ+ projects may compete with each other. It is also telling that the concept of solidarity is very rarely found in the pages of the thesis. And when it does appear, it is often mentioned in the context of reflecting on the lack of solidarity.

Lukinmaa presents the rhizomatic organization of the LGBTIQ+ movement as its strength, making it "resistant to external interference" (171). However, based on her analysis, one could also argue that this rhizomaticity is no less a result of internal disagreements, atomization, lack of solidarity between

different activists. In their original work theorizing the rhizome, Deleuze and Guattari stated that “the rhizome contains the best and the worst” (Deleuze, Guattari 1987, 7). Lukinmaa’s use of the rhizome concept highlights only the “best” of the LGBTIQ+ movement in St. Petersburg. Therefore, I would suggest that it might be productive in future research to include more ambivalent features of a rhizomatic organization in an analysis of the LGBTIQ+ scene.

Thinking along the lines of a rhizome, another direction for future research could be an examination of the interactions between LGBTIQ+ and non-LGBTIQ+ actors. Again, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize that a rhizome contains heterogeneous elements. Their examples of a rhizome include packs of rats or ants, as well as a wasp and an orchid, or the human body and a virus. Following this line of thought, one could, for example, look more closely at a rhizome of the LGBTIQ+ activist body, police

and media that is already present in Lukinmaa’s text (251–252). Certainly, the concept of rhizome opens up a number of interesting research perspectives.

But so does Lukinmaa’s thesis as a whole. It makes a productive contribution to the research on contemporary gender and sexual politics in Russia, as well as to the studies of LGBTIQ+ and new social movements. And among other things for which Lukinmaa should be praised, it is that her work provokes further thinking and opens up prospects for new research directions.

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