

De-Centring Western Sexualities

Central and Eastern European Perspectives

Edited by

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Introduction:
Why Study Sexualities in Central and
Eastern Europe?

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Although homosexuality in its many manifestations has been a significant factor in societies throughout the ages and across cultures, the real explosion of its politics and visibility has taken place after World War II and, arguably, in the 'West'. The vast amount of academic literature about sexuality is written from and in a Western (Anglo-American) context. However, even when considering the recent shift in queer studies towards embracing the margins and outskirts, de-centring the politics of geolocation, the growing amount of literature on non-Western cultures continues to concern mostly post-colonial 'far-flung' regions (Asia, Africa). There is still noticeably less work done about the West's 'neighbouring' countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

By introducing CEE as a 'European context' (somehow 'Western-ish' since 'European' tends to equal 'Western') we would like to pluralise and problematise the notion of 'Western/non-Western' sexualities (because of the stress on 'Central and Eastern' denotation). We do so because we believe that the dichotomy 'West/non-West' is mainly constructed on the basis of Anglo-American ways of experiencing sexuality, making the 'Western experience' the normative one, placed at the centre of narratives. The most straightforward aim of this book is, thus, to critically assess the current state of knowledge about sexualities outside the all-pervasive framings of the 'West', and to focus on their expressions in the 'nearby' and still underexplored region of Central and Eastern Europe. By doing so, we consider both categories, West and CEE, and show that it is virtually impossible to foreclose and homogenise them as any sort of coherent entity.

Sexuality and Post-Communist Studies

The 20 years after the fall of communism produced a vast amount of literature about the CEE region (among many others, see Rupnik 1999; Drulák 2001; Kymlicka and Opalski 2005; Shiraev and Shlapentokh 2002; Ekiert, Kubik and Vachudova 2007; Pleines and Fischer 2009). However, we feel that post-communist studies are still predominantly political science studies, interested in transformations of political systems in the region; together with economics, these two disciplines form the dominant perspective. There is, however, a growing body of work about

cultural and social re-evaluation of everyday life experiences in CEE, written from cultural studies perspectives; yet it still remains relatively small in comparison with economics and politics.

When focusing specifically on CEE, one needs to acknowledge the existing and well-developed body of literature about women and feminism (e.g. Funk and Mueller 1993; Gal and Kligman 2000a, 2000b; Jähnert and et al. 2001; Johnson and Robinson 2007). However, hardly any of these positions undertakes the effort of scrutinising non-heterosexuality. It can be said that, contrary to the existing literature on gender and sexuality in the Western cultural context, the field of sexuality studies in (and about) CEE is in its infancy. The scarcity of work is clear. So far only a couple of publications (e.g. Štulhofer and Sandfort 2004; Kuhar and Takács 2007) have directly targeted the issue of homosexuality in the post-communist countries. There are a few other books that contain entries on a single country (e.g. Eder, Hall and Hekma 1999), books about CEE (or a particular country) that have a chapter on sexuality, among other issues (e.g. Flam 2001), or gender and lesbian and gay studies journals that occasionally publish articles concerning the region. It is not much, although of all the regions, Russia seems to stand out, with a fast growing scholarship (e.g. Essig 1999; Baer 2002, 2009; Stella 2007). However it is not our aim here to present a comprehensive bibliography because this is well covered through the references at the end of each chapter.

CEE and Sexuality Studies

By introducing CEE as the geopolitical framework, we bring a 'new' area of examination into queer/sexuality studies. The epistemological focus on the hierarchies and dynamics of exchange between West and CEE highlights power as one of the main categories, together with wider structural inequalities in the organisation of the world (the macro level). At the same time, the chapters explore the hegemonies of everyday life, e.g. lived experience of 'globalised/localised gay identities' (the micro level). In the spirit of an intersectional approach, we are convinced that by grouping chapters that deal with different national settings, both theoretically and empirically, we open up the platform for further study by constantly refocusing attention on different categories and issues, specific to each context.

Consequently, this book highlights some underlying hierarchisations present within queer studies, and contributes to the discussion about the notion and meaning of 'queer'. In doing so, we join other voices calling for the de-centralisation and de-Westernisation of 'queer theory'. If, in a Western context, 'queer' is to somehow relate to (and presumably reject) identitarian politics of the 'Stonewall era', this volume asks what is left of 'queer' in the CEE context, where Stonewall never happened; where it stands as an empty signifier, a meaningless figure, and yet is still a pervasive and monumental reference.

We hope that this book will help to unsettle Western perspectives in queer studies by providing new insights in discussions about what constitutes 'queer'. It brings together macro- and micro-level analysis, providing conceptual and empirical tools and arguments. It probes the boundaries of geographical regions, cultural practices, temporal narratives, discursive concepts and imagined locations. The chapters collected in the book offer a perspective (or rather a range of perspectives) on non-normative sexualities that are relational and performative, temporal and 'geohistorical'. These sexualities remain in wider economies of global exchange of capital (cultural, social, financial, spatial and historical). We look at them at particular moments of 'post-communist transformation' and 'democratisation' as a site of tussles between hegemonic discourses in a transnational context of negotiation and resistance.

Outline of Chapters

The chapters are grouped into two areas. The first consists of theoretical writings focusing on the transnational circulation of homosexualities and identities, and on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual/transgender (LGBT) politics in CEE. The second focuses on issues of intimacy, practising queer citizenship and kinship in CEE. All chapters question the relation of CEE to the West on various levels, and so proliferate the debate about 'transnational sexualities', 'global LGBT activism' and 'locality'.

Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa's chapter, "'Contemporary Peripheries': Queer Studies, Circulation of Knowledge and East/West Divide", creates a larger theoretical framework for the whole book. By undertaking issues of the hegemony of time and space – as reflected in the Anglo-American production of knowledge, globalisation, post-socialist transformation and lesbian and gay studies – the chapter provides critical engagement with current trends in queer studies – especially of a post-colonial provenance. The authors aim to problematise and pluralise the notion of 'Western' sexuality and indicate its 'contemporary periphery' – i.e. mechanisms of 'Othering' CEE (e.g. by rendering it 'permanently transitional'/'post-communist'). The authors try to visualise their ideas of time by providing a graphical representation as two separate geopolitical-temporal modalities running parallel, where in 1989 one of them finishes and the other becomes universal for both. However, the authors contrast the Western 'time of sequence' with the Eastern 'time of coincidence' represented as a 'knotting' and 'looping' of time(s). Mizielińska and Kulpa use as an example sexual politics in CEE and try to organise the 'knotted temporality of CEE' into familiar stages and inscribe it into a particular history (here into a Western history of LGBTQ (queer) movements), simplifying it in order to make sense of it. However, they also ask a set of important questions:

- Does such 'unknotting' make sense, and for whom?
- What are the prerequisites to be able to understand it in either form?
- Why are certain models familiar to 'all'?
- Why will local narrations of lesbian and gay emancipation be seen as precisely 'local' and not 'universally' recognised?

With this chapter, they want to undertake the task of questioning the power relations between 'West' and 'CEE', between Western queer academic scholarship and CEE theoretical insights, calling not only for the 'de-centralisation of queer theory', but also for greater attentiveness to spatial and temporal choices in doing so.

Jelisaveta Blagojević, in her chapter 'Between Walls: Provincionalism, Human Rights, Sexualities and Serbian Public Discourse on EU Integration', recalls the recent debate about the second national gay parade in Belgrade in 2009. What prevailed in the arguments of the local authorities, and also those who declare themselves in favour of 'Europe, EU integration and human rights', was the conviction that sexual orientation is a private matter and 'should be kept behind the [four] walls'. Accordingly, there are no reasons to demonstrate one's sexual preferences in public. The metaphor of 'the wall' helps Blagojević in analysing public discourse on human rights and sexuality in contemporary Serbian society. Additionally, she refers to the notion of the 'provincial mind', introduced by the Serbian philosopher Radomir Konstantinovic in *Filosofija palanke/Philosophy of the Provincial* (1981). Although predominantly targeting Serbian nationalism, Konstantinovic's criticism may equally be applied to any geopolitical location. 'Provincial mind' is a state of consciousness that may, and indeed does, occur everywhere. So by asking questions about sexuality, provincialism, the Balkans, the European Union (EU), Gay Pride, nation and nationalism, and homosexuality Blagojević explores some deeply intertwined, and thus not obvious and not much analysed connections between them. This chapter can be said to deal with provincialisms of every identitarian logic (of thinking and politics) that continue to haunt, like Marx's spectre, every idea of a 'community' (be it sexual, national or pan-national).

In the third chapter, 'Nations and Sexualities – "West" and "East"', Robert Kulpa reflects on the recent flourishing of works about nations, nationalism and national identities in relation to homosexuality. Although recently there have been more attempts at discussing homosexuality and nationality (mainly within the domain of 'sexual citizenship'), overall surprisingly little has been written about the sexual underpinnings of nationalistic politics and about the nationalist dimension of gay politics. Thus, the chapter's goal is to build up the theoretical relation between the literature on sexuality and on nationalism, reflect on their intrinsic connections and analyse any possible conjectural foundations on which further analytical work could be done. The author uses examples from CEE to round up his writing with empirical flesh and probing questions. Kulpa traces these relations of nation/al and sexual in the emerging discourses and uses of the geotemporal categories of 'progress', 'West' and 'East' and 'transition'. By

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doing so, he critically engages with some recent writings on the topic, and shows how neo-imperial politics of the 'West' may operate not only as a 'civilising' (and annihilating) mission but also as a 'pedagogical' (profiteering) one.

The fourth chapter – 'A Short History of the Queer Time of "Post-Socialist" Romania, or Are We There Yet? Let's Ask Madonna!', by Shannon Woodcock – maps the turbulent decades of contested activism and the practice of 'sexual rights' in Romania. By confronting rather underground and radical Romanian youth queering politics, she highlights and critiques the pervasive European hegemonies of 'modernisation'. By the use of a simple term, 'Europeanisation', Woodcock manages to draw a sharp and uncompromising picture of powerful hegemonies and inequalities in relations between Romania and the EU. She shows how Western donors have continued to set the agenda for the funded development of an LGBT community in Romania, irrespective of the local cultural and historical context. The author uses recent queer writings about the processes of 'racialisation' of Otherness – at the expense of which the 'gay progressive' agenda of Western societies is funded – to analyse Romanian relations between sexual and ethnic minorities. In particular she shows how 'Western-like' 'pro-gay politics' is established through the exclusion and degradation of the Roma minority.

In the chapter 'Travelling Ideas, Travelling Times: On the Temporalities of LGBT and Queer Politics in Poland and the "West"' Joanna Mizielińska writes on the translation of 'Western' ideas of LGBT and queer politics into a Polish context, and tries to show what is lost/gained throughout this process. First, she presents the recent Polish political scene and other examples of sexual politics in Poland. By doing so she aims to describe the limitations of queer (in) politics in Poland, but also to show some of the resistance actions performed by LGBT and feminist circles in Poland. She argues that queering politics can mean different things locally and that what can be described as an identity approach from a US perspective can have its queer face on the local level. Therefore, she expands upon the already introduced concepts of the Western 'time of sequence' and the Eastern 'time of coincidence' and suggests that Polish LGBT activism cannot be categorised simply as 'identitarian' or 'queer' because it exists in a different geotemporality compared to the 'West'. She focuses on the Campaign Against Homophobia (CAH), the largest and best-known Polish LGBT organisation, and shows that in their choice of strategies and discourses one can see the queer mixture of ideas that represent various historical stages of Western LGBT activism. She suggests that one of the reasons is the 'temporal disjunction', a historical void, in which the CAH works. The 1990s mark the beginning of LGBT activism in Poland but not in the West. During that period Western ideas were unanimously applied without much attempt at understanding their cultural and historical context and functioning. At the end she reflects upon Anglo-American knowledge production and presents critical queer stances towards primarily American 'queer theory'. She points to the recent developments in the field of queer studies that show the need for greater 'localisation' of sexual politics, contextualising it within local historical, geographical, political and linguistic contexts. Her chapter thus

contributes towards opening the debate about the shape and meaning of 'queer' and its potential outside the Western context.

Jon Binnie and Christian Klesse's chapter, 'Researching Transnational Activism around LGBTQ Activism in Central and Eastern Europe: Activist Solidarities and Spatial Imaginings', is based on an empirical research project on transnational activism around LGBT politics in Poland. Transnational activism has been a significant component of resistance against the banning of equality marches in 2005 and 2006, and against violent attacks by far-right groups and homophobic public discourse – all associated with the rise of the Law and Justice Party and the League of Polish Families. The chapter considers the different understandings and conceptions of solidarity that motivate and inform transnational actions. For instance they discuss how notions of sameness and difference are articulated within these conceptions of solidarity, and are particularly concerned with exploring the affective dimensions of what Carol Gould has termed 'networked solidarities'. Finally the authors consider how sexuality can be theorised in relation to alternative conceptions of (transnational) solidarity within social and political theory.

The next chapter, 'Rendering Gender in Lesbian Families: A Czech Case', by Kateřina Nedbálková, focuses on methods and strategies used by lesbian parents to construct and rework concepts of gender in their everyday practices. Considering still present social stigma and many instances of culturally sanctioned homophobia, the author examines how these redosings are used for political legitimisation, social restriction, cultural stigmatisation or personal empowerment. Another focus of this chapter concerns the academic scholarship about 'queer kinship' – in particular how concepts are 'framed' by social scientists re/researching lesbian and gay families. Nedbálková is especially interested in the interplay between regimes of knowledge, both at the level of personal lives and their academic theoretisation, and between Western 'non-normative kinship' scholarship and Czech realities. The chapter is based on ethnographic research of lesbian couples with children in the Czech Republic.

Roman Kuhar, in the chapter 'The Heteronormative Panopticon and the Transparent Closet of the Public Space in Slovenia', writes about the heteronormativity of public space in Slovenia and its repercussions in the everyday life of gays and lesbians. In the heteronormative geography of public space, where images of heterosexuality are omnipresent, and thus 'invisible', signs of homosexuality automatically present a disturbance to the system. The omnipresence/invisibility of heterosexual codes 'magnifies' homosexual ones, which are then immediately accompanied by potential threats of homophobic violence. This chapter is also based on empirical results of the author's earlier research. The author suggests that the experiences of gays and lesbians in public space can be interpreted in the context of Foucault's elucidation of Bentham's panopticon and Hannah Arendt's 'Pariah/Parvenu' dichotomy. The panopticon, as Foucault explains, establishes self-surveillance whereby power is actually exercised by prisoners themselves. Similarly, the sense of 'being watched' experienced by Slovenian lesbians and gays in public spaces leads them to a self-performed

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surveillance of their own homosexuality; they 'abolish' their own expressions of sexuality during the time of being 'imprisoned' in the panopticon of public space (the 'transparent closet').

In their chapter 'Heteronormativity, Intimate Citizenship and the Regulation of Same-Sex Sexualities in Bulgaria', Sasha Roseneil and Mariya Stoilova aim to expand the theorisation of heteronormativity in Central and Eastern Europe by exploring the regulation of intimate citizenship in Bulgaria since the late 1960s. Their central argument is that the institutionalisation and regulation of intimacy in Bulgaria has been both implicitly and explicitly heteronormative. They also trace a number of shifts in legislation and policy, and the emergence of lesbian and gay activism, during the post-socialist period, which indicate an emergent challenge to the heteronormative framing of intimate citizenship. So, for example, they discuss how the socialist state regulated an individual's sexuality and reproductive behaviour through the promotion of marriage and procreation, and the penalising of those who did not have children. Further, they discuss the relaxation of state policing of intimate lives after 1989, the final revoking of laws criminalising homosexual acts, and the establishment of rights to non-discrimination and protection from violence. The authors explore two cases and argue that their importance goes beyond the protection of individuals concerned with discrimination; they had a larger cultural and symbolic importance in a situation of rapid social change. Finally, the investigation goes into how LGBT groups are seeking to challenge the heteronormative regulation of intimacy.

Alexander Lambevski, in his chapter 'Situating Intimate Citizenship in Macedonia: Emotional Navigation and Everyday Queer/Kvar Grounded Moralities', explores the 'democratisation' of intimate spheres of life in post-socialist Macedonia – from the difficult democratisation of intimate relationships and development of new sexual subjectivities, to the increased visibility of new intimate and sexual stories and ways of existence contesting traditional heterosexist and patriarchal models of sexual object choice. These new arrangements are linked by membership in various complex and competing groups and communities, and thus marked by various degrees of solidarity, conflict and tension. Theoretically situated at the lesbian and gay/queer/feminist border, the chapter examines the fragile creation of multiple and overlapping intimate queer public spheres which single mothers, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, sexually liberated women and non-traditional heterosexual men occupy, and where they practise the politics of affinity and emancipation. By paying very close attention to actual lived situations of a small group of people, the chapter attempts to ground the rather abstract current debates on intimate and sexual citizenship by focusing on how these Macedonians confront ethical dilemmas arising from their non-normative sexuality and how they deal with them practically.

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