



Transnational Homosexuals in Communist
 Poland. Cross-Border Flows in Gay and Lesbian
 Magazines

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Lukasz Szulc is a Communication Studies researcherⁱ (Marie Curie Individual Fellow in the Media and Communications Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science), published author in journals such as *Sexualities*, *New Media & Society*, *Social Media + Society*, *International Journal of Communication*; and in chapters to books such as *Queer in Europe* (2011) and *Everyday Nationhood* (2017). He is co-editor of the book *LGBTQs, Media and Culture in Europe* (2017) and contributor to the blog *Notches: (Re)Marks on the History of Sexuality*. His approach stands out better than any other Political Scientist's endeavor in addressing gay activism, because, in doing so, he is de-constructing numerous myths that have hampered our understanding of this type of activism.

Starting from Altman and Symon's book (2016) *Queer wars*, Szulc says: it's a hoax! And, like any other hoax, although almost beautifully true, it is not. 'Queer wars' are a myth and should be treated accordingly. Enough with the narrative divide between 'the West' (North America, Western Europe, Australia and Israel) and 'the Rest' (the Middle East, Arabs and Islam) in the rhetoric of a sexual clash of civilizations (Puar 2007, 2013). Szulc analyzes the literature in the field of LGBT studies, by accounting numerous articles, books, and debates that generally polarize world politics. He explains that the polarization gets the form of 'Othering' countries: the Western ones, in which the levels of LGBT rights have been incorporated in the 'national identities' (Puar 2007) and those in which the battle for sexual minorities' recognition is still ongoing. In the mapping of such countries, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in Owczarzak's words (2009), is seen as 'neither fully civilized nor fully savage'. By addressing the LGBT specific issues, Szulc

manages to challenge several myths attributed to this space, and in this endeavor, argues that the key factor enabling and sustaining such myths involves the de-historicization of homosexuality in the region.

The issue of de-historicization should be made according to the following myths that he identifies. These myths are the homogeneity of the gender and sexuality issues (1); the essence of the region (2); the teleological narrative of the CEE's 'transition' after 1989 from communism to Western ideals of capitalism, democracy, and ethics (3). The idea of homogeneity refers both to the CEE and to the West, in which the differences are many times exaggerated in the pursuit of making 'cross-cultural divides' and the similarities inside the geopolitical entities are treated relatively the same. In doing so, many authors get trapped into essentializing the regions, in which "the West is imagined as essentially progressive, that is, post-racial, post-feminist and post-gay, and CEE as essentially backward, that is, racist, sexist and homophobic" (p. 5). The first two myths are seen as 'spatial' (or cultural), while the third one is of temporal nature. It refers to the end of the Communist regimes in 1989 in the CEE, in which the time before the countries began their process of transition (economically/politically/ethically) post-1989 is treated by many scholars as a 'non-time'. Most researches of the LGBT issues in the CEE begin post-1989, which only condemns the respective countries to a state of perpetual belatedness. In Navickaitė's (2016, 128) words "everything that will ever happen in post socialist societies is going to be just an imitation of what has already happened in the West".

Altogether, these myths are built on the idea of the near-total isolation of CEE during the Cold War (4). The near total symbolic separation of the CEE from the West in terms of gender and sexuality issues enables and reinforces the other three myths, create a 'historical amnesia'(p.7) and only de-historicizing the CEE region can we start to better understand it and implicitly understand the LGBT issues. The book proposes and successfully manages to identify the first forms of activism in the region, tracks the connections between activists from CEE countries and the West, and shows that one can discuss about the globalization of homosexuality, LGBT identities and politics, in CEE already before 1989.

The research of the book is based on archival analysis of gay and lesbian magazines in late communist Poland. The author addresses a transnational approach to the study of sexuality (...) which is multiscalar, that is, it stresses the interconnections between different spatial scales of analysis such as the local, the national, the regional and the global (p.9). Poland is a puzzling case

for selection. It is often given as an example due to its civil society movements that overthrew the communist regime in the region, however, the involvement of the Polish Catholic Church in terms of gender and sexuality post-1989 hampered the laws drastically. There is the 1993 abortion law, according to which abortion is illegal unless (1) the mother's life or health is endangered, (2) she became pregnant because of a criminal act or (3) the fetus is seriously malformed (Kulczycki 1995; Zielińska 1993, 2000). The debate between nationalism and sexuality is a constant feature regardless the period (pre/post EU accession), and the rising wave of right-wing activism against the so-called gender ideology. On top of these, the Law and Justice party, in power since 2015, recently pledged 'to wage a 'cultural counter-revolution' in Europe (Foy and Buckley 2016).

Two Polish gay and lesbian magazines stand at the center of the research, namely *Biuletyn*, later renamed *Etap*, published by Andrzej Selerowicz in Vienna between 1983 and 1987, and all issues of *Filo*, published by Ryszard Kisiel in Gdańsk between 1986 and 1990 (p. 11). In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with three of the magazines' authors: Selerowicz, Kisiel and Paulina Pilch. Moreover, the author links the two magazines with the main activist groups the Wrocław-based *Etap* and the Gdańsk-based *Filo*, "which makes the history of the magazines inseparable from the history of homosexual activism in the country" (p. 11).

Primary and secondary sources are also used in the analysis. They include all Eastern Europe Information Pool (EEIP) reports published annually between 1982 and 1989 and commissioned by the International Gay Organization, later known as International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA). Also, documents from the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) regarding Operation Hyacinth (launched in Poland in 1985 by the police forces in order to create a 'homosexual inventory'); articles on homosexuality published in popular and alternative media in Poland in the 1980s; as well as a 1988 survey on Poles' attitudes towards homosexuality (p. 12), to name the most important ones.

The book is divided into two parts and 8 chapters. The first part, Global, Eastern and Polish Homosexuals, de-constructs the myths mentioned in the first Chapter, namely the region's homogeneity, essence, teleological 'transition' after 1989 and near total isolation during the Cold War. In Chapter 2, the literature review addresses the emergence of dominant modern LGBT identities and politics, virtually only recognized after the fall of communism in Europe. The author draws on postcolonial and transnational literature in the deconstruction of these myths, putting to question the idea of 'Westernization', as a one-way process. The chapter represents a compendium

of LGBT studies, at the global level. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is seen as a catalyst for the emergence of gay and lesbian identities and politics in the West (p. 38), however non-Western identities remain problematic in this endeavor. The HIV/AIDS epidemic also became a ‘hot topic’ in CEE after 1989, especially due to the greater mobility of people after 1989, the introduction of new market economy and the decline of state services, resulting in increased sex tourism, rapidly growing prostitution and higher rate of needle use (Altman, 2008). In this manner, the idea that Europe changed many issues of the LGBT population is thought as a ‘catalytic event’ (Darsey 1991), rather than the beginning of the LGBT movement or sexual globalization (p. 47).

Chapter 3 brings the results of the EEIP reports to light, in the way in which the reader finds out about laws and practices regarding homosexuals, public discourses on homosexuality as well as the emergence of gay activism. This chapter emphasizes the complexity of the Eastern Bloc in relation to homosexuality and highlights the transnational dimensions of early homosexual activism in the region (p. 62). The chapter offers authentic descriptions made by the members of the ILGA member organization HOSI, in their visits to the former Yugoslavia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland or Romania, to name a few. The unfavorable perceptions of communism (p. 70) or the ‘Balkan mentality’ clashes with the idea of the West either as ‘progressive’ or as ‘decadent’ (p. 71). Self-organizing aspects of some LGBT groups are also presented in the reports, at the beginning of the 1980s. More information on how these groups organized and mobilized are presented in Chapter 4. The chapter begins with the political and social context in Poland in the 1980s, by focusing on the role of the communist state, and the political opposition of the Roman Catholic Church. The undercover operation against homosexuals code-named ‘Hyacinth’ in 1985 had the purpose to detain, interrogate and register both actual and alleged homosexuals in order to create a kind of state ‘homosexual inventory’, or ‘pink archive’ (p. 106) – made of 11,000 files. The way in which activists organized and mobilized facing police’s harassment; their first framings and demands for official recognition, make this chapter by far the most interesting of the first part.

The second part, Transnationalism in Gay and Lesbian Magazines, draws on how transnational elements shaped *Biuletyn/Etap* and *Filo*. This part of the book incorporates the empirical analysis. Chapter 5 addresses theories of alternative media and discusses their importance for social movements (p. 126). The author also portrays the history of gay and lesbian publishing in the West, pointing to its crucial role in both creating national homosexual movements and connecting their activists transnationally, and in inspiring authors of *Biuletyn/Etap* and *Filo*

(p.126). These magazines did not only play the role of a key communication channel for homosexual activists but also created an actual space within and around which formed the first more systematically organized homosexual groups in Poland (p. 148).

Etap's story intertwines with Andrzej Selerowicz's personal history: 20 issues of the magazine, carried out in Vienna, given/mailed to people he met during his stays in Poland. The entire content of *Biuletyn/Etap* was focused on men only, because "didn't want to participate in the lesbian movement because I knew very well that I was completely unfit for this job" (p. 141). *Filo* magazine also started as a one-man project - Ryszard Kisiel, who published 17 issues (100 copies) since November 1986 until May 1990; and which later developed as an editorial team of 6 people. Kisiel handed over his position of editor-in-chief first to Remigiusz Placyd (1988) and then to Artur Jeffmanski (1989). There were no women involved in the magazine during the first years of *Filo* but Kisiel did sporadically include some information related to lesbians. Paulina Pilch started sending her articles in June 1989, when she was only 16 years old and became the first female author (p. 144).

Next, Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 offer plentiful evidence by highlighting the content of the two magazines, around the issue of identity (coming out/sexuality/collectivity) and politics (activism/writing histories/mobilization/visibility/community). In both chapters, as well as in Chapter 7, the reader is guided in seeing the bricolage of the gay activism in Poland. Gay identities and politics in the magazines were "reconstructed and rebuilt because they were much influenced by Western ideas about what it means to be a homosexual and what it entails to do homosexual activism" (p. 179). These magazines played the role of alleviating these problems, for instance, by providing their readers with dreams and hopes of such romantic-erotic relationships (p. 179). These magazines also provided the space and worked towards creating a homosexual solidarity and aimed to turn it into political identity (p. 205): "Homosexuality is not just about two men going to bed, it has also a socio-political aspect if it is related to discrimination" (*Biuletyn* 1985, 1, p. 2). Activists adapted and adopted Western ideas in the magazines and these two intertwined processes make these chapters' explanatory power fully understand why the myths of the CEE region should be understood and de-constructed by any scholar in the field.

Conclusions are drawn in Chapter 8, in which the author resumes the most important insights from each chapter and further refines them in order to encompass broader issues (such as the globalization of homosexuality). The last part addresses the puzzle of the book: that queer wars

are a hoax. The author further argues that homosexual identity paradigms and activism models have been traveling from the West to the East, but also (to a lesser extent) the other way around. They were already products of multiple cultural influences and as such, they informed, without therefore determining, the understandings of homosexuality at their places of arrival (p. 225). The mutual co-constitution of different geopolitical entities is vital to be recognized.

Finding shortcomings of Szulc's book is a hard endeavor. The theoretical model, the empirical findings and assuming the role of the 'Myth buster' of CEE gay activism stand as groundbreaking in the LGBT literature (with few exceptions that the author mentions thoroughly in the book). Perhaps the next scholar who intends to enlarge the transnational approach to other countries in the CEE region could argue, at some extent, if this model may fit other geographical scales.

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