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Robert Kulpa: Sexing Poland. Some Thoughts about Gay (and National) Identities after 1989

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Abstract

The proposed discussion paper represents part of ongoing research and focuses on scrutinising reciprocal processes occurring between gay identity (and community) and national identity in Poland in the course of their formation after 1989. It seeks to understand how the Polish post-communist transition context shapes understandings of homosexuality and sexual politics; and how regional variables form new and distinct identities (i.e. lesbian and gay) and communities, when compared to local and wider, global traditions. Finally, it directs its attention to the impact of these sexual identities on the ongoing process of national identity formation; how gay and lesbian politics attempt to influence governmental politics (and other activities on the organisational/structural level of the state and society) and, most importantly, how they shape social debates over the notion of 'Polishness' in the 'new' age of Polish (and world) history.

On the theoretical level, I propose the disengagement with current (dominant) research perspectives and methodologies on sexualities (and to a lesser extent on post-communist transformations). Thus, the project is inter-disciplinary, drawing on the humanities, social and political sciences, and extends itself on the experiences of social activism.

1. Introduction

It was not until the late 1990s that sexuality and national identity, along with their links and intersections, were scrutinised and looked at together in post-communist Poland. The few texts written at the time were preoccupied with how sexuality was manifested under communism, and just after the fall; or how sexuality was understood and acted upon in a non-democratic (and implicitly, non-liberal and non-capitalistic) context (see: Stulhofer and Sandfort 2005; Basiuk, Ferens and Sikora, 2006; Kuhar 2007). Hardly any of the existing studies, however, actually examined any of the *reciprocal dependencies* or intertwined *mutual influences* between sexuality and post-communist realities. At this point, there are few comprehensive analyses of the interconnections between the re-shaping of national identities and the emergence of sexual identities and politics. Thanks to feminist scholarship, some works have been written about the gendered constructions of nationalisms (e.g. Yuval-Davis 1989), but these studies only refer to sexuality sporadically, if at all, and in relation to (heterosexualised) gender roles (Verdery 1994). Sexual and sexualised dimensions of national constructions, with few exceptions (e.g. Mosse 1985, Parker *et al.* 1992, Pryke 1998), still seem to be undervalued and/or neglected.

One of the main assumptions of this text – which represents the starting point of the research process, rather than its final (proved or rejected) conclusion – is that post-1989 Poland is still undergoing the transformation of its national identity. As I will try to show below, certain traditional features of Polish identity do not correlate with the post-1989 reality, and it is therefore 'necessary' to re-think what constitutes Polishness.

On the meta-level, this research project seeks to disengage with current (dominant) research perspectives and methodologies on sexualities (and to a lesser extent on post-communist transformations). I propose a multi-disciplinary approach because I believe that none of disciplines alone can explain what happened in Poland after 1989, nor describe the transforming processes of identity, democracy, and citizenship, or the role of the state, nation, sexuality, tradition, and (post)modernity. Most of the theories deployed to analyse these topics originated in the West in a specific socio-historical context and, as such, are often inapplicable to non-Western contexts. As Chantal Mouffe wrote:

Liberal democracy (...) is not the application of the democratic model to a wider context, as some would have it; understood as regime, it concerns the symbolic ordering of social relations and is much more than a mere 'form of government' (1996, 245).

Western theories purport to be 'universal'; however, they merely constitute power relations disguised as 'knowledge', so sharply described by Michel Foucault and criticised by many others. Theorists have indeed

frequently used idealised models that are ill-equipped to describe the existing reality (for an insightful overview see: Kymlicka 1995).

On epistemological grounds, I use Queer Theory to create a local perspective in contrast to the established ('universal') body of knowledge about national identities. (In this context, 'local' has various meanings: 'particular' vs. 'universal', as in Laclau [1996, see also below and the following chapter]; *localised*, i.e. narrowed only to this project; Polish and/or Central European; etc.) My intent is to offer an approach that is 'new' in this environment, and validate it only within the framework of this research (i.e. without aspiring to present another 'universal' paradigm that is supposedly time/space/circumstance independent).

This flexible approach to the object of my research and its execution reflects the constantly changing realities of Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, a more deconstructive approach will be adopted: rather than trying to *explain* (the importance of the output), I want to better *understand* (the importance of the process itself) the presented problem. To accomplish this, I will need to de-hegemonise the Western theoretical perspective on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); therefore, the process of 'alienation', '(re)-appropriation' and 'dis-placement' will be touched upon in this research on various levels. The process will concern subjects and objects of the analysis and (meta-)narrative, and the examined communities will be on equal footing with the researcher and reader themselves. This approach is inspired by the recent turn within queer studies, predominantly in the later writings of Judith Butler¹ and Joanna Mizielińska², among others, towards ethics and rethinking one's relationship with 'the Other' and the 'discursive and visual ways of humanisation and dehumanisation [of a subject]]' (227–230).

Narrowing this general framework, it should be stressed that the primary focus is on identities. With respect to their importance in contemporary sciences, I follow scholars of lesbian, gay, and queer studies, nationalism, and social epistemology, and insist that the study of identities is an important element in establishing and proliferating contemporary scholarship. They all suggest that modern everyday life is based on the concept of 'identity', from advertisements that try to convince you that body lotion helps you to discover 'your true self' to local boroughs that make their policies for local communities *identified (and identifying themselves) through* ethnicity, religion, and gender (among other categories).

My particular interests concern how gay identity was constructed in Poland after 1989. By looking at lesbian, gay and mainstream discourses on homosexuality, I will scrutinise the vision of homosexuality produced by 'majority' and 'minority' elements of society. My point of departure is that although homosexuality was (conceptually) present in Polish history and culture as an unspoken fact, the terms 'gay identity' and 'gayness' were the unforeseen *bêtes noires* of the 1989 transformation. Straightforwardly implanted from the West by Polish homosexuals who underestimated the explosive political and social reaction to the word 'gay', the terminology quickly proved to be very problematic for both gay people and the architects of the transformation.

What sorts of meanings did Polish society attach to 'homosexuality' and 'gayness'? Does the shift in those meanings correlate with changes in discourses on 'Polishness'? It is interesting to evaluate which type of 'gay identity' was created in queer discourses, especially when contrasted with the mainstream discourses on homosexuality. Finally, considering the traditionally strong position of the Catholic Church in Polish culture, and the (presumably) significant impact of the European Union (EU) (from 1997, i.e. the beginning of enlargement negotiations), I will discuss the impact of the Catholic Church and the EU on queer and mainstream discourses. How did those two institutions influence the notions of 'homosexuality' and 'gayness', and thus contribute to the shaping of certain types of 'identities'?

1 Butler, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso. Also: Butler, Judith. 2004b. *Undoing Gender*. London-NY: Routledge.

2 Mizielińska, Joanna. 2006. *Płeć/Ciało/Seksualność. Od feminizmu do teorii queer*. Kraków: Universitas.

2. 'Polishness' and the Traditional Paradigm

Although various authors analysing the problems surrounding national identity in Poland focus on slightly different aspects (e.g. Nycz 2002, Shallcross 2002, and Auer 2004, to name a few), it is possible to identify certain core features that appear in the vast majority of these contributions: (1) the strong presence of religion (especially the Catholic Church), martyrdom and victimhood in Polish culture; (2) the multi-ethnic society that existed in Poland before first world war, between wars, and the single, almost monolithic ethnicity after WWII; (3) Polish relations with Jews and with Russians and Germans; (4) the exclusionist attitude fuelled by a sense of inferiority and superiority to neighbour countries, most recently evident in the crisis of values during the post-1989 transformation and EU accession; and (5) the exclusively heterosexual dimension of national roles.

Below I will suggest that the first four elements, which are seen as fundamental components of the 'traditional' paradigm of Polishness – thanks to the processes of democratisation that started after 1989 – are no longer truly valid; thus, those elements need to be thoroughly re-thought and re-conceptualised.

Their importance lies in the fact that although they have lost their significance in this 'new', democratic reality, they are still circulating and continue to form the basis for conservative-leaning discourses. And since those factors rely on a past that was finally 'discontinued' and 'abolished' in 1989 (implying that pre- and communist times did not differ much in the construction of national identity), political and social life today seems to consist of a blur of mismatched idea(lism)s.

Religiousness used to be perceived as shaping the morals and ethics of everyday life, but also as a central feature of Polish national identity. Religious institutions also helped to transmit other cultural values over time and space, such as language, customs and habits, which often could only be spread by the relatively independent Catholic Church.³

Today, however, Poles no longer perceive religion as the most important facet in their everyday lives. 'Sociological analysis of Polish religiousness shows that a great amount of Poles treat religious truths and teachings selectively. Occasional spectacular gestures, like mass pilgrimages (...) are not always accompanied by the amelioration of religious life'.⁴ On the other hand, religion has sneaked back into public life through the back door as an institutionalised political actor. What was once a 'religious aspect' in the national tradition has since marched into politics arm in arm with the Solidarity workers' movement as 'The Catholic Church' (Auer 2004, 69–70).

The institutionalisation of religion is not a new phenomenon. In the Polish context, the salient fact is that when the Polish monarchy lost its administrative 'being' as a state in 1795, the Catholic Church established its institutional connection to Poland. Throughout the following years, up until 1989, it was the Catholic religion that bound people together, to the extent that Catholic values and Polish values were inextricably intertwined (the fact that Poland's past oppressors, the Russians and the Germans, were primarily Orthodox and Protestant, respectively, made it even easier to unite Catholicism and Polishness as 'one'). When (liberal) democracy was 'installed' in Poland after 1989, new values came into play that succeeded in pushing religious tenets aside in public life. That was the moment when the Catholic Church 'reinvented' and re-established itself in public and political life – not through values, but (simply) as an institutionalised actor. Hence, we no longer talk about the religiousness of the nation, but about the role of 'The Church' in democratic state politics.

3 Auer, Stefan. 2004. *Liberal Nationalism in Central Europe*. London-NY: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 68–70.

4 Brzoza, Czesław, and Andrzej Leon Sowa. 2003. *Wielka Historia Polski*. Tom V. Kraków-Warszawa: Fogra; and Świat Książki, p. 793.

The primacy of the collective over the individual (Martyrology) has taken various shapes in Poland, mainly the form of fighting with a (real or imagined) 'Oppressor'. Prior to 1989, stress was placed on the duty of the individual to place The Polish Nation above personal happiness. It was also presented as a fight for independence or struggle for survival, cultural as much as political. Finally, the romantic idea of Poland as the Christ of nations, sacrificing itself at the altar to save the world's freedom, exemplifies the myth of injustice and victimhood that has long been a part of the national ego.⁵

This component collapsed more quickly than anyone would have expected. The unity of the victorious Solidarity trade union was wrecked by its own members in the first fully free parliamentary elections of 1991. Small party interests won over unitary politics.

This was the first sign of pluralism entering the political scene, possibly a reaction to communist totalitarianism, or just a sign of the new socio-political situation in Poland. 'Tearful', 'over-angelic' and 'full of martyrdom' Polish Messianism (Szrett 1990, 36) had to yield space to other problems that came with the abolishment of communism. Overall, the stress after 1989 came to rest on the 'state/citizen' pairing, whereas before the emphasis had been upon 'Poland/nation'. This represented a shift from the cultural to the civic, where civic identity came to play a greater role (as the processes of (liberal) democratisation require) but did not supplant the previous (pre-1989) pairing. Or, as Seyla Benhabib wrote: 'Citizens are not prisoners of their respective states' (2002, 172).

Ethnic diversity. The Commonwealths of Poland and Lithuania of the pre-partition period (until 1795) and the Second Republic (1918–1939) had minority populations of more than 30 percent. Ultimately, Polish culture was founded on these multiethnic roots, which were bonded together by the civic political idea(lism)s of unity (Walicki 1997, 233).

The disappearance of ethnic minorities has given Poles the false impression (i.e. one based on ethnic representation, which excludes other, non-ethnic and 'new' identities and attitudes) that Polish society is a homogeneous organism. This erroneous conviction systematically forms a background for conservative attitudes, especially in the context of 'recent' problems in Polish society, such as xenophobia and discrimination (Umińska 2006).

Presence of Jews and the East/West divide. Until WWII, the Jewish minority living in Poland comprised a significant 10 percent of the overall population; the Shoah and events of March 1968 reduced the number of Jews to a fraction of a percentage.

Today, many commentators (see Umińska 2006, Graff 2008) point out that there is a parallel between Jews and gay people in the role they serve in the Polish society, i.e. that of a scapegoat; it has been said that homophobia is the anti-Semitism of the 21st century. However, even though issues of homophobia and anti-Semitism stem from the same xenophobic roots, they still encompass many different problems, and thus require separate assessment.

Finally, the last characteristic of 'traditional Polishhood' – *the East/West divide* – has seemingly faded. After 1989, Poland entered into the world processes of globalisation, which lessened the divide. Moreover, its accession to the EU in 2004 is often read as the final answer for the question of to which tradition Poland belongs. Still, many remain dubious.

This doubt is reflected in the relationship with neighbouring countries Germany and Russia. Poles feel inferior to the former and superior to latter. Lipski critiques this duality of the 'Polish soul', concluding that the Polish attitude is 'grotesque' and 'pitiful' (1990, 60).

5 Janion, Maria. 1989. *Wobec zła*. Chotomów: Verba; and Janion, Maria. 2000. *Do Europy tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi*. Warszawa: Sic! Also: Zubrzycki, Genevieve. 2007. *The Cross, the Madonna, and the Jew: Persistent Symbolic Representations of the Nation in Poland*. In: Mitchell Young, Eric Zuelow and Andreas Sturm, eds. 2007.

3. Gay Identity in Poland

In contrast to the general literature on homosexuality and gay identities, the field of sexuality studies in (and about) Poland is in its infancy. This could be because the 'traditional paradigm' (as pre-1989 cultural history and attitudes) is a queer mixture of communist and pre-communist heritage. The pre-communist era was characterised by the superiority of the nation over the individual and infused with patriarchal (i.e. heterosexualised) gender roles (mothers and warriors).

During communism, primacy was again given to the collective body of the citizenry, and heterosexuality was present as an implicit rule (reproduction as the key duty in the service of (re)building the country/nation). The pre- and communist eras were both characterised by (1) disregard for the individual, with no allowance for pluralism; (2) a lack of openness to 'Otherness' (often identified with physical geography and liminal spots: East and/or West, 'outside Poland', expulsion/defecation from the inside of the body/nation, etc.); and (3) the strong existence of resistance – resistance against the oppressor, something outside; and internal resistance within the country/culture against the compulsory system of thinking, behaving, consuming, etc. Homosexuality, therefore, as actively expressed in gay identities, and the lesbian and gay communities built upon them, had no place in Poland before 1989.

One of the first authors to write about homosexuality in Polish culture (albeit from a literary perspective) was the Swiss Slavist German Ritz (2002). According to him, the most significant aspect of this presence is silence, conformism of cultural (literary) life and the generally accepted and present domestic dimension of literature (2002, 53–54). It is in these three areas that he looks for manifestations of homosexuality. On more socio-political grounds, he recognises differences in the development of Western and Polish social structures/hierarchies (sexuality as a Western middle-class commodity), and suggests that it could be another reason why the absence/presence of homosexuality in Poland is different from Western societies (2002, 53).

In his analysis of Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki's *'Mazepa'*, Ritz indicates Romanticism as an equally important moment for the creation of Polishhood. The same theme is found in Maria Janion's work on Polish nineteenth-century literature and national identity. She suggests that it was this period that set up modern Polish discourses on gender and nationality, with strong and overwhelming yet flat and one-dimensional identities (e.g. Janion 2000). This notion has inspired Małgorzata Radkiewicz, who herself analyses Polish contemporary cinema, and shows how these conceptions of gender formed in the 19th century, however implicit or literal, are persistent in modern audio-visual culture (2005).

In terms of sexuality-related issues, some useful observations may be found in the following texts. Anne-Marie Kramer explores discourses about abortion in the early 1990s, and suggests that the discussion was not only about the legal regulation of the private sphere and choice, but primarily about the values underpinning national identity (2005).

Polish literature on the subject nonetheless has a predominantly general, or indeed, very specialised character, focusing on the analysis of one event or film or other cultural artefacts (e.g. Basiuk, Ferens and Sikora 2002, 2006; Sypniewski and Warkocki 2004, among others). Furthermore, many authors refer to and often base their work on Western lesbian and gay studies and theories in an attempt to familiarise Polish readers with this body of work. This project is thus unique and original, as it undertakes major research in the field of sexual identity formation, and contextualises it in the post-communist socio-cultural transformations.

Finally, I also propose that – although gay people claim that they only want to live their lives as gay subjects (i.e. treat their sexual identity as the primary one) and that the actions they undertake to liberate themselves from oppressive social structures are just about the will to live positively (e.g. without discrimination) – the wish to pursue the 'gay identity' has a much broader dimension and scope of influence than is claimed. Indeed, it is about shaping the very meaning of the Polish national identity. By claiming the wish to pursue gay lives in Poland, gay people are re-forging Polish identity, causing it to shed its

traditional features and calling upon Poles to embrace new values. How does the organised gay community influence discussions about the notion and shape of values in the democratic environment? The flourishing gay community – along with its sub-culture, which is manifested in informal meeting groups, non-governmental organisations, the existence of gay media (press and internet), clubs and bars, film screenings, etc. – has managed to establish itself as an important participant in social debates. It has challenged traditional Polish values, such as the subordination of the individual to the nation, religiousness and obedience to the teachings of Catholic Church, patriarchal gender roles and the disregard of foreign cultures. Instead it has opted for the ‘modern European’ set of values, like individualism, pluralism, secular ethics, and freedom of choice of (gender and sexual) social behaviour. This clash of values, as represented in public debates in the media, legislative initiatives over the issue of discrimination, or social campaigns, will be examined against the presumption that it was (and still is) the main problem in Polish post-1989 culture. One of the moments of this struggle is examined by Joanna Mizielińska, who analyses the impact of the Catholic Church on the final draft of the new Polish constitution, and how this led to an exclusionist and heteronormative model of citizenship in Polish law (Mizielińska 2006, 143–162).

4. The European Union and the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church (‘the Church’ or ‘CC’) is a social and cultural institution that evolved on the ground of Poland’s traditionally religious society. It grew in strength during communism, even though circumstances were not conducive (Chrypinski 1989, 241). It was possible because the Church linked itself with the opposition, successfully merging the notion of resistance with religiousness. A simple mental mode of thinking – ‘my enemy’s enemy is my friend’ – meant that anything not favoured by communism or opposing it was *ad hoc* valued as positive and good. Nonetheless, at the beginning of 1990s the Church was seriously injured and weakened, mainly due to the first ‘war over values’, in particular over the right of women to abortion (Kramer 2005). It won this battle, forcing the passage of very strict legislation, but it seriously damaged its own credibility due to its overinvolvement in politics.

Both power holders, the EU and the Church, were present in Polish culture throughout the period of 1989–2004. Obviously, the clash between the two forces was unavoidable. Homosexuality (and gay identity with its rising community) was ‘the issue’ that helped to crystallise the conflict. Moreover, it escalated exchange and power dynamics in order to dominate/hegemonise and re-appropriate the space of political, cultural, and social life in post-1989 Poland. Similar to the rift between gay and national identities, the clash between the EU and the Church was, and is, about values, attitudes towards sexuality (and gender), and the meaning of ‘Polishness’. The Church pushes tradition and does not recognise changing social reality as being important to progress and is bent upon renewing the old national paradigm.

With respect to Poland, the EU introduced anti-discrimination laws in the workplace, with direct reference to sexual orientation, and has suggested more general laws against discrimination. The EU has also supported civil society by involving it in governmental politics as a consultant body. In turn, the gay community has used ‘EU’ as a keyword, chief asset and threat in their strategies.

The tensions between the EU and the Church is observed in the discourses they produce and the tussles they engage in over the meaning of words, and hence, social reality. The ‘neutral’ and pro-diversity discourses of EU institutions and the proclamation of positive (even joyful) and pro-active attitudes towards the future clashed with the martyrological, past-oriented, religious account of social relations offered by the CC. Sexuality became one of the most important battles, seen and promoted as the celebration of the individual vs. reproduction of a nation; the freedom to choose vs. obedience.

And finally, the Catholic Church (as observed in the Catechism), the European Union (as in legislatives and directives) and the gay community (in their pledges) agree with each other in one respect: they understand the existence of sexual identities and public ignorance about them as an opportunity to communicate their views about them in social, cultural and political spheres.

From this image it becomes clear that the transition period is a time of tensions between national and supranational, local and global, gay and Polish, etc. Each side advocates seemingly different interests, but on the other hand, this 'conflict' may be understood as a failed attempt to communicate because of the 'incompatible languages' used by each side. If the Church 'safeguards' the traditional paradigm, it sees the (neo)liberal EU as a threat to the national identity and culture. And although the Church does not voice this sentiment directly (as Pope John Paul II made it clear that the CC is in favour of the EU enlargement), its feelings are apparent in its attitudes towards feminism, homosexuality and other 'modern problems', topics that are recognised in EU policies as important enough to be addressed directly. The Church would clearly prefer to have silence on these issues and have them put back into the 'intimate' sphere. This, finally, brings us to the topic of the gay identity and its understanding.

At this point I should like to remind readers that the main aim of this research project is to better understand the discursive creation of gay identity and contextualise it in the ongoing process of the re-negotiation of national identity in post-communist Poland. The re-configuration of sexual identities in Polish post-communist culture is interpreted in terms of the social transformation of traditional values (and as a political process of democratisation in the post-authoritarian state). I have adopted a cross-disciplinary approach and seek to highlight the importance of sexuality for the understanding of the processes of social and political transformation in former communist states, particularly in Poland. Therefore, I will try to analyse different factors and channels of communication, interaction and re-production of meanings. Moreover, I will try to grasp the structure and fabric of power networks, without claiming to present final explanations for the ongoing processes. And since the problems scrutinised in this work have not yet been resolved, I will advocate queer approaches as a new pathway to achieve these goals.