

Queering Central and Eastern Europe:  
National features of sexual identities

A day-conference at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, UCL, Friday, 11 April 2008

Sexualities, as keys to identity and as part of the public language of the nation, are a controversial feature of post-communist transition in Central and Eastern Europe. Radical political changes have led to the emergence of new social actors, such as the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement, the airing of new public discourses surrounding sexuality, as well as the eruption of new social conflicts and divisions.

This day-conference devoted to the study of non-normative (or queer) sexualities in Central-Eastern Europe is a forum to reflect on the diversity of issues and approaches in this new research area. The scarcity of scholarly work concentrating on this region, in queer theory, in studies of gay and lesbian experience in the past and present, and in the sexual politics of the marginalised, is a significant gap. Indeed the emergence of sexualities studies for Central-Eastern Europe challenges canonical theoretical and interpretive frameworks grounded in North American and Western European contexts.

Queering Central and Eastern Europe: National features of sexual identities adopts an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars in the social sciences, history, Slavic and other area studies, as well as activists from LGBT communities, to examine the intersection of gender and nation as formative concepts for sexualities. How, for example, did the emergence of revised national identities after 1989 overlap with new conceptions of non-normative gender and sexuality? What were the local dimensions of the lesbian and gay question, and why did they emerge? How did queer sexualities in this region evolve historically, and what influence does that historical legacy impart today? What is unique about Central and Eastern European sexual identities, when compared within the region and with Western and other non-Western formations?

## REPRESENTATIONS

Djurdja Knezevic (Zenska Infoteka, Croatia)

In the analysis of statements of nationalistic groups (mostly women's groups) which were appearing in Croatian daily newspapers during the war (particularly in 1993/4) I will show the complexity and ambiguity of male-female relations at the symbolic level. Although it is expected that in the time of war gender roles are just maintained and petrified (basically, the division is: tough men as warriors,

and week women as victims), the division appears ambiguous. There is indeed the state playing the symbolic role of the tough father and, in contrast, women who are tender, caring, mothers of our boys. As fighters, men have allegedly a greater responsibility and therefore a higher position in the social hierarchy than women. Women, however, being mothers, treat them (the young boys) as small, effeminate sons who need their care and protection. Also, we witness, not only in the war after the break-up of Yugoslavia, women who shift into the role of men, as fighters, warriors.

Anna Gruszczynska (Aston University, Birmingham, UK)

In my paper, which is based on my doctoral project, I am looking at the processes whereby from 2001 on, marches, pride parades and demonstrations have become the most visible and contested activity of the Polish lesbian and gay movement. It was only in 2001, that the first successful attempt at organizing an LGBT Pride Parade in Poland. Parades in 2002 and 2003 in Warsaw gathered increasing numbers of participants from all over the country. At the same time, public resistance to the increasing visibility of gay and lesbians was growing, alongside the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic feelings connected to Poland's entrance to the European Union in 2004, as well as the rise of right-wing political forces. From 2004 on, LGBT marches and demonstrations were attacked by right-wing protesters (March of Tolerance in Krakow in 2004 and 2006, March of Equality in Poznan in 2004) and cancelled by right-wing city authorities (Warsaw Pride in 2004 and 2005, March of Tolerance in Krakow 2005, March of Equality in Poznan 2005). My main interest is in analyzing the meanings attributed to public activism and examining how the activists define their identity, strategies and priorities. Furthermore, I am exploring how the activists are using the marches (as well as the protests around the marches and their bans) to construct and control the frame of representation of sexual minorities in Poland.

Francesca Stella (University of Glasgow, UK)

While in the literature queer lives, spaces and communities tend to be located within the major centres of gay consumer culture (Binnie 2004:4), sexual diversity in provincial areas has been largely ignored as a field of enquiry (Binnie 2004; Knopp and Brown 2000; Knopp 2003; Nartova 1999; Sarajeva, forthcoming). In an attempt to address this gap, my PhD research on lesbian identities and spaces in urban Russia has included two case studies, set in metropolitan Moscow and provincial Ulianovsk. While informed by the comparative perspective of the overall project, this paper focuses on Ulianovsk, a city of 700,000 with no gay commercial scene or established community venues. The paper focuses on lesbian and bisexual women's negotiations of everyday space; it explores women's strategies for navigating across different urban settings, as well as their involvement in informal lesbian/queer networks, thus highlighting the theme of individual and collective agency.

The first part of the paper explores the dis/comforts involved in women's management of their sexual identity across the home, the workplace and the street. Close ties with the local community and a high degree of social scrutiny meant that becoming visible as a lesbian was not always

perceived as a viable, safe or desirable option. Although lesbians, as individuals and as a social group, remained largely invisible in the local community, women also lay claims to public space by appropriating specific places as lesbian/queer . The second part of the paper maps these places, and examines the strategies and practices through which such space is carved out and constructed as lesbian/queer .

## HISTORIES

Adi Kuntsman (John Moores University, Liverpool, UK)

Based on a critical reading of several Gulag memoirs and of scholarly works based on them, the paper addresses a topic seldom discussed in Gulag studies: same-sex relations in the camps. This paper suggests that same-sex relations in memoirs of the Soviet Gulags are both hypervisible and silenced. The depiction of those relations works to produce and maintain boundaries of class subjectivity, constituted in the memoirs as boundaries of morality and humanness. This paper has two aims. First, to bring same-sex relations forward as an important topic to the field of Gulag studies. Secondly, to challenge the status of the memoirs as neutral historical evidence from which we learn about sex in the camps; instead I suggest that we must approach them as cultural texts that constitute, rather than document, formations of sexuality, morality and humanness.

Mark Cornwall (University of Southampton, UK)

This paper explores for the first time the behaviour and treatment of homosexual men during the Nazi occupation of Prague. Using as a backdrop the vibrant Czech gay sub-culture of the 1930s, it analyses how queer space was interrupted or sustained during the war years. It particularly employs court records from the Prague archives to study the varied levels of homosexual behaviour and victimhood in wartime conditions: where men were subject not only to §175 of Germany's criminal code, but also to blackmail in a city increasingly beset by violence and social hardships. The case study seeks to build on our understanding of queer space in wartime, and questions the notion that a Nazi occupation of Prague significantly altered the previous Czech liberal regime's treatment of homosexuals (§129b of the Czech criminal code).

Dan Healey (Swansea University, UK)

Recent studies of twentieth-century rural homosexuality note the resourcefulness of men living and working beyond the vaunted meccas of urban gay subcultures. Men in the backwaters found ways to express gay desire: same-sex work and living arrangements and the homosociability they produced facilitated opportunities for same-sex desiring men. Using the techniques of microhistory I explore a handful of sodomy and murder criminal cases from villages in Leningrad Province in the 1950s, to consider the ways in which masculinity operated at a popular level, in a supposedly totalitarian state, at a time when that state was keen to replenish its reserves of manpower after the devastation of the Great Patriotic War. By looking at how rural Soviet citizens viewed gender fluidity, homosexual acts

and same-sex relationships in their midst, we can begin to trace popular attitudes towards homosexuality in Russia at a key moment in Soviet history.

## EAST / WEST

Nick Mai (London Metropolitan University, UK)

The paper will present results of recent research on the migration experiences of male minors and young adults from Albania and Romania into the European Union (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, the Netherlands) and will focus on their livelihood strategies (sex work in particular) and the associated predicaments and opportunities. The research identifies the main dimensions of minor mobility, a socio-cultural formation and a mobility pattern characterised by the subjection and resistance to social and political domination, and by different and multiple levels of social, cultural and affective de-territorialisation. It is further marked by the potential vulnerability to high risk (exploitation, STDs) and criminal behaviour, and by dynamics of differential social inclusion/exclusion. Selling sex and minor mobility will be addressed as two connected social and cultural formations allowing many young men and male minors to negotiate their gendered and sexual identities across contradictory socio-cultural and economic settings.

Robert Kulpa (UCL SSEES, UK)

Recent years witnessed flourishing prosperity for the study of nations, nationalism, and national identities. Events like the fall of the iron curtain, EU enlargement, or so called 9/11 terrorism, facilitated and rejuvenated the discussion on the need, place, possibilities, and future shapes of (broadly speaking) nations and their cultures. Coincidentally (or not) enough, some similar breakthrough dates appear in the calendar of development of the sexuality and gender studies. Especially appearance of the Queer Theory is significant in this context. Maybe after almost 20 years of its existence, it is worth to look at this body of works, which I rather call queer theories (than capitalised Queer Theory) with the exact and direct conjunction of the nationalism studies? Although study of the nations through gender (and to significantly lesser extent, sexuality) lenses and study of sexuality through a prism of national cultural context is already nothing new (and again: at least to some extent, in certain context, & ), still the direct similarities, interests spots, and understandings circulating with queer theories were not used to study nationalism and national ideologies. Therefore this paper will explore the areas of mutual interests for both disciplines, and on the more practical level while referring to the case of Poland in particular, and Central and Eastern Europe in general will attempt to use some of the queer tools to better understand the dynamics hidden behind national identifications.

Joanna Mizielińska (Gender Studies, Warsaw University, PL)

With the advent of same sex marriage homosexuals have achieved mere equality in much of Europe. Everything is rosy so why they should keep on fighting? This is the statement that one hears at the beginning of the movie called *Rainbow's End* (2005) by Jochen Hick which shows

different examples of discrimination based on sexual orientation all around Europe. Its large part focuses on Poland and it is not by mistake. It seems that joining the EU Poland has approved its value system and the respect for human rights. However, in 2005 parliamentary and presidential elections were won by Kaczynski twins who openly disapproved public promotion of homosexuality and banned annual Equality parade in June 2004. This victory (and also the growing tendency of regaining power by conservative parties across Europe) has shown that open homophobia sells and brings its supporters real political gains.