

The possible and the desirable: Queering the standard LGBT narrative in Poland

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1) I think we are witnessing a "pessimistic turn" in Polish LGBT activism. A number of recent texts by some leading activists/commentators express a deep dissatisfaction with the present situation of LGBT issues in Poland. Samuel Nowak, for example, discusses the recent American movie *Milk* to conclude that it should be a lesson for the ineffective LGBT movement in Poland. "Let's not be afraid of conflict," he says and pleads for a radicalization of activism. Another activist, Wojtek Szot, criticizes the LGBT parades and marches organized in major Polish cities as not political (or ideological) enough. He complains that over the last 20 years Poland's LGBT people have gained "practically nothing" and urges a confrontational politics of anger to demand the right "live with dignity." A third example comes from the "veterans" of the movement: Tomek Kitlinski and Pawel Leszkowicz: in their text "The defeat of progressive gender and queer politics in Poland?" they call Poland a "theocracy rather than a democracy." Gender and queer politics in Poland has failed, they claim, as much because of the

failures of Polish politicians, as because of the movement's own failures. The key to a change lies in actual participation in structures of power, they conclude. [The above "reckonings" of the LGBT movement have been occasioned by the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots and the 20th anniversary of the fall of communism in Poland; the *Milk* effect is also clearly noticeable.]

2) I do welcome the feelings of anger and dissatisfaction, because I see them as potentially very productive culturally and politically. Just after the last parliamentary election in Poland, i.e. after power was transferred from the openly homophobic PiS to the more elegant and liberal PO, I was striking a note of warning against the sense of some supposedly regained "normalcy" in Polish political life. At the same time, I find many of these LGBT critiques highly problematic on certain accounts. To put things briefly, I see a significant and, to my mind, dangerous narrowing of the horizon of LGBT(Q?) activism in Poland. All of the accounts I have mentioned above, and many others, measure the progress of LGBT(Q) activism merely with legal achievements, or the lack thereof. While I recognize many positive results of the legal changes that have taken place in some Western democracies concerning LGBTQ people, I am surprised when I read, in Kitlinski and Leszkowicz, a *bona fide* statement that the "more civilized" countries of Western Europe or North America have actually achieved an LGBTQ

"utopia," to which Poland can only (and obviously should) aspire. My point is that any "serious" LGBT(Q?) discussion in Poland is limited exclusively to the vocabulary of civil rights (notably same-sex partnerships) and the path for Polish activism has been clearly marked by Western activism that has managed to win everything that was to be won.

3) In view of the above, my personal "pessimistic turn" has to do with the fact that the queer project - as opposed to those LGBT politics that are mostly rooted in neoliberal thinking - seems to have failed. Not permanently, though, I hope. I am deeply convinced that we need a much more nuanced view of such terms as "civilized," "utopia," "(linear) progress," "politics," etc. We need a more critical philosophy of the law and its effects (which does not mean a rejection of legal action as an LGBT/queer strategy). We also need, definitely, a more critical philosophy of modern capitalism in relation to sexual practices and identities. (Iza Kowalczyk rightly points out that Pawel Leszkowicz, who is now so critical of the LGBT situation in Poland, until quite recently expressed his optimistic belief in the progressive and beneficial effects of the free market.) In other words, what LGBT/queer activism needs is a recognition that the activism is not a "minoritarian project," but rather it must become part of a larger project, a project of a thorough critique of the political/legal/economic complex that now rules supreme in much of

the "civilized" world. (This is the approach that Lisa Duggan takes in her critique of contemporary "homonormativity" in the American LGBT movement.) Much LGBT criticism is leveled (rightly) at the influence of the Catholic church in Polish society, but not too many activists notice the "neoliberal disease" which is reducing our political notions, particularly the notions of the "possible" and the "desirable." At a more general level, queer politics may be conceptualized as a politics that is inherently destabilizing and subversive - even if it destabilizes our received notions of sexual identity or "gay rights." As I see it, queer politics should be a politics of crisis, because crisis opens up new horizons, new directions, new parameters of identity. It is a politics which strives for multiplication rather than unification, which fosters new kinds of (social/political/sexual) connections rather than established entities (hybridization), and which is ready to risk a certain amount of (social/political/sexual) unintelligibility that may bring about an "epistemological crisis," enabling new forms of subjectivity and sociality to emerge.

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