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Polish Queer Lesbianism: Sexual Identity Without a Lesbian Community

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The article investigates the state of Polish lesbianism. It presents the history of lesbian groups, lesbian culture, and community in Poland. It puts social and political activism of lesbians in the context of the growing feminist movement and strong nationalism in Poland. Showing the important role of the Internet communication and the way in which queer philosophy is understood in this country, it investigates sexual identity formation and the process through which lesbian communities develop in Poland. The analysis of Polish lesbianism confirms the constructionists' theory that sexual identity formation highly depends on cultural and political circumstances.

KEYWORDS *lesbianism, sexual identity, queer, lesbian community, Internet, Poland*

You can't live in a post-revolutionary fashion in pre-revolutionary times
(Rita Mae Brown, in Ponse 1978, p. 188)

Lesbianism has never been very visible in Poland, but the end of 2009 witnessed the appearance on the Polish lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) scene of a very popular lesbian cabaret group, *Barbie Girls*. The group's witty skits have won it many fans and invitations to perform at almost every lesbian and gay event in Poland. A Polish feminist magazine, *Zadra*, a commercial TV channel, *TVN*, and the most popular women's weekly, *Wysokie Obcasy* (*High Heels*), have featured interviews with the group's members. The latter, a magazine with a large circulation, has published the group's picture on its front page. In their repertoire, the *Barbie*

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Girls have a song, which they called the *Polish Lesbian Anthem*. But is there a lesbian community in Poland to sing this anthem with them?

Although homosexuality stopped being criminalized by Polish law in 1932 (Kliszczyński, 2001, p. 161), strict censorship and the limited right to public assembly during the socialist regime had forced homosexual people to live their lives in secret. With the collapse of the socialist system in Poland in 1989, the sexual minorities' movement began to burgeon in the pursuit of more social freedom and civic rights. Lesbians and gay men started to organize themselves in order to change the perception of homosexuality, which had been equated with deviance and sickness. However, the preliminary enthusiasm of the first activists, who wanted to establish lesbian and gay associations encompassing the whole of Poland, soon burnt out due to financial and organizational problems and the lack of an organized gay community (Adamska, 1998).

The newborn Polish democracy not only gave an opportunity for new social movements to develop, but also allowed for the far political right to re-emerge on the Polish political scene. In the absence of any visible ethnic minority groups, Polish nationalists chose gays and lesbians as their most salient enemy. Attacks on equality marches and numerous homophobic statements of conservative politicians suppressed the development of the lesbian and gay movement and community in Poland, leaving on the stage only the most enduring and committed activists. There have been several lesbian and gay organizations in Poland during the last two decades. One of the first, and still very active, is the Lambda Warszawa Association, part of the Association of Lambda Groups established in 1990 (Gruszczyńska, 2009). It mostly focuses on running a phone help line as well as legal and psychological help programs. Yet the most popular organization among lesbians and gay men in Poland are the Equality Foundation (Krzemiński, 2009) and the Campaign Against Homophobia with its headquarters in Warsaw and several outlets established in various Polish towns in recent years. Since 2001, starting with the first demonstration which took place in Warsaw, marches have been organized regularly in several Polish cities to celebrate gay pride. The Equality Foundation annually organizes the Equality Pride in Warsaw. A similar event in Kraków bears the name of the March for Tolerance, while in Poznań it is called the March of Equality. There is also the "Lesbians, Gays and Friends Festival" celebrated annually in Wrocław. Most of the Polish organizations are run under the banner of LGBT, but in a practical dimension most of their activism addresses lesbians and gay men. There is a separate organization Trans-Fuzja, which deals with issues of transsexualism, transgenderism, transvestitism and cross-dressing. No officially registered organization currently active in Poland addresses solely lesbian issues.

This article argues that young generations of non-heterosexual Polish women are increasingly open to the international lesbian and gay culture, even though lesbianism in Poland encounters many obstacles due to the lack of an organized community and the low visibility of lesbians in LGBT

or feminist organizations, as well as due to the conservative world views of Polish society and strong position of the Catholic church. The article examines the case of the lesbian community in Poland (or rather, the lack thereof) in regard to its social, cultural, and political activity, and shows how lesbian and queer identities are shaped.

The empirical part of the article's body is based on the participant observation and a few interviews with the leaders and activists of lesbian groups in Poland. Their main scope was sexual identity formation, the history of lesbian groups and lesbian culture and community in Poland. The first section of the article focuses on Polish lesbians' social and political activism and puts it in the context of nationalism and the feminist movement in Poland. The second section sheds more light on the attempts of queer philosophy and politics implementation in Poland. It is followed by the analysis of the process through which lesbian communities emerge in Poland, putting stress on the important role of Internet communication. It concludes with the statement that the case of Polish lesbianism confirms social constructionists' theory that sexual identity formation is culturally and politically contingent.

"REAL LIFE" LESBIAN ACTIVISM IN POLAND

As social scientists contend, the existence and active support of the community is a necessary condition for a social movement to emerge (Bernstein, 1997; D'Emilio, 1983). According to Jeffrey Weeks (1985), five conditions are necessary for identity politics to emerge: "the existence of large numbers in the same situation, geographical concentration; identifiable targets of opposition, sudden events or changes in social position and an intellectual leadership with readily understood goals" (p. 191). As the following analysis of lesbianism in Poland shows, hardly any of these conditions seem to be fulfilled here. A study on homosexuality in post-Soviet Russia (Essig, 1999) confirms that without a strong leadership, institutional infrastructure, collective and shared subculture, the mere sharing of common interests provides little basis for a movement to succeed. As for lesbianism, strong alliances with gay activism and the feminist movement are also important.

As for the Polish feminist movement, it can be described as being still in its developing stage due the very patriarchal Polish culture (Graff, 2003). Agnieszka Graff, in her essay "Lost between the Waves?" has put forth a provocative argument that in their social activism, Polish feminists apply "second wave politics and third wave themes and tactics" (p. 103). The goals for which they are striving are reproductive rights and equal rights for equal work, which are similar to the aims of the second wave of the feminist movement in the West. However, the forms of activism, which they use, are street performances by a feminist hip-hop group, parodies in a "camp" style, Internet debates, as well as the employment of queer theory.

Lesbians share the same social predicaments with all Polish women, who have always been portrayed as “brave victims” (Graff, 2003, p. 102) devoted to family life and childbearing, eager to make every necessary sacrifice without a word of complaint. A closer look at the Catholic catechism and the Polish constitution shows that in Polish society, the social positions, which are assigned to women, are wives and mothers (Mizielińska, 2001). Lesbians are useless for the Polish nation because they refuse to be wives and rarely become mothers. Excluded from the concept of nation, they are overlooked with silence in public discourse. Mainstream media mostly present images of women in relation to men and children and show character traits such as passivity, self-sacrifice, maternal instinct and self-fulfillment in domestic duties, as naturally female. Every woman who does not fit into this image is automatically excluded and punished for not being feminine. Silence about lesbians in official discourse in Poland influences public opinion about them and supports common stereotypes, further strengthening existing homophobia and the pressure on lesbians to remain invisible (Mizielińska, 2001). Indeed, the publication of the interview with *Barbie Girls* is one of the rare attempts of the Polish mass media to look more closely at the lesbian world and culture (Goll, 2009).

Since 1989, a few formal and informal lesbian organizations have emerged in Poland. As there was no second wave of the feminist movement in Poland, a strong wing of lesbian feminism has never emerged there. In comparison, the way lesbianism is present today in the United States has grown out of the butch and femme culture thriving there since the fifties. When the second wave of feminism arrived, it espoused lesbianism as a political choice and gave way to experimenting with sexuality. This contributed to women joining the lesbian community in large numbers (Stein, 1997) and to the development of women’s groups. The consciousness-raising process, in which these groups engaged women, allowed for talking openly about their feelings, sharing experiences with others and “analyzing the situation and abstracting from it for further action” (Wolf, 1979, p. 61). It encouraged them to create a sense of lesbian identity and strong bonds within the community (Ponse, 1978; Stein, 1997; 2006). Polish lesbians seem to have missed this phase of the feminist movement.

The first groups, Lesbian Lambda group and the *Safo* group in Kraków and *Lambda Bilitis* in Warsaw, which came into being in the 1990s, focused mainly on creating a supportive environment for lesbians and propagating lesbian and gay culture by collecting and discussing lesbian books, screening documentary and feature films, and organizing football matches (Cieśla, 2009; F., Anna, 2009). Only the *OLA-Archiwum* Association (OLA-Archives Association) established in Warsaw tried to introduce a feminist perspective into Polish lesbianism. It has published several issues of the *Furia Pierwsza (The First Fury)*, an academic magazine on feminist lesbian theory and practice (Górska, 2005). The Lambda lesbian groups and the *Safo* group

attempted to support the development of lesbian identity, helping lesbians to cope with the prevailing social hostility. They have rarely questioned lesbianism as an inborn sexual orientation, which is unanimous with publications, well known at that time, on the discovery of a “gay gene” (Hamer et al., 1993).

While the first lesbian groups were small and closed, the Lesbian Coalition (LBT), which came into existence in 2004, was more militant and oriented toward actions in public space (Weseli, 2009). The women who established it deliberately chose the word “lesbian” as a part of its name in order to make lesbianism more visible in Poland. In 2005, members of the Lesbian Coalition (LBT), along with a group of feminists, co-organized the annual street demonstration in Warsaw, called *Manifa*, which is held on Women’s Day (Górska, 2005). The Lesbian Coalition called on lesbians to join them in protest against discrimination on account of sexual orientation. On the 17th of May, the International Day Against Homophobia, members of the group have regularly organized happenings called the *Anti-homophobic Center* in many cities of Poland. Wearing white hospital uniforms, the activists talk to pedestrians in the main streets, questioning them about homosexuality and handing out information leaflets (Górska, 2005). In September 2006, as a result of the action called *Our Case*, organized by four activists of the Lesbian Coalition (LBT), the court in Poznań decided that two city councilors, who compared homosexuality to zoophilia, pedophilia, and necrophilia, had to apologize publicly (Śmiszek, 2007, p. 49). The actions of the Lesbian Coalition marked a new stage in lesbian activism in Poland, when homophobic prejudice in Polish society became their main target. Yet, most of them have been organized by a handful of activists, without any great support from a broader community, which then started to emerge due to Internet websites.

As the above account of Polish lesbian activism shows, the main reasons for its narrow scope or impact were the small numbers of participating women, their geographical dispersion and lack of identifiable leadership. A few significant but singular actions, although making lesbianism publicly visible for the first time, did not provide common goals and were unable to attract other lesbians. Also the weakness of the Polish feminist movement contributed to lesbians’ feeling of estrangement. Although the content of Internet websites in Polish language indicate that feminist awareness among lesbians and familiarity with lesbianism among feminists are rising, some feminists expressed the opinion that the goal of the feminist movement in Poland should be to consolidate the community of women. Therefore supporting lesbianism would divide it into two different fractions of lesbians and heterosexual women (Chińcz, 2006). On the other hand, in the view of some Polish lesbians sexism is more a concern of heterosexual women and therefore they do not feel a need to describe their lesbian existence in feminist language (Mizielińska, 1997).

QUEER THEORY, POLITICS, AND CULTURE IN POLAND

As Adam Green has pointed out (Green, 2002), the problem with two decades of queer theory scholarship is that, by focusing on deconstruction of sexual categories, it overlooks the fact that these categories are deeply embedded in many social institutions and have enormous impact on shaping the experience of heterosexual and homosexual persons' lives. Fluidity of sexuality and performativity of sexual and gender roles recognized by queer theory may pose a real challenge to social actors who have been already socially conditioned to fixed sexual identities.

Joanna Mizielińska, who has published books on queer theory in the Polish language, points out the difficulties in translating and implementing queer theory and politics in the Polish context (Mizielińska, 2009). According to her, the word "queer" is untranslatable into the Polish language. Substituting it with a Polish word with as equally pejorative a connotation as the word "queer" in English, would meet with protest from lesbians and gays, who would not like to be defined in this way. Without translation, the word "queer" has a limited meaning for some and no meaning at all for others in the Polish context because it is unknown and not well understood. On the other hand, using it without translation allows Polish scholars, who teach courses on queer theory, to avoid trouble. Indeed, even among Polish academics, there is a lot of confusion about what queer theory means (Mizielińska, 2009). So-called queer theory courses consist of a mixture of materials on the history of the lesbian and gay movement and genuine queer theory. They mix materials on the essentialist model of sexual identity with its queer theory critique, which sees sexual identity as socially constructed, questionable, and fluid. The word "queer" has been adopted by some Polish gay and lesbian activists, too.¹ Queer theory and politics originally signified the conscious refusal to take on a limiting sexual category. However, in specific cultural and political circumstances, as in the case of Poland, where the lesbian and gay movement is still in its pre-emancipatory stage, it is being used as a tactic for survival. According to Mizielińska, this kind of practice is contrary to the genuine meaning of the confrontational, "in your face" queer politics and can be dangerous. By desexualizing queer theory, Polish activists deprive it of its subversive power. Mizielińska asks: "Can we simply skip a number of stages in the fight for visibility and assimilation of homosexuals and accept a theory and practice that is affirmative towards all kinds of 'queerness'? Or should we go through the necessary preliminaries of creating a form of gay social identity in order to contest and deconstruct it afterwards?" (Mizielińska, 2009, p. 1).

Some lesbian activists claim that they have skipped the essentialist identity stage. They say that: "We have left lesbian identity behind us. We are all queer now" (Chińcz, 2009). For younger women who were born in Poland after 1989, and who are now in their twenties exploring and defining their

sexuality, it is much easier to accept a queer label than “to enter into the plain shoes of lesbian” (Chińcz, 2009). Queer is perceived as normal and fashionable, in contrast to the word “lesbian” which, in the Polish context, still sounds like “a lash on the back” (Chińcz, 2009). Queer theory is associated with academic studies and a higher level of abstraction, which makes it easier to accept and embrace. It is treated as a useful disguise to successfully introducing new and subversive ideas to address pervasive homophobia in Poland.

Parallel usage of both the essentialist and fluid conceptions of sexual identity sometimes causes confusion among members of the lesbian community. For example, the only place in Warsaw offering regular events for lesbians, the Unidentified Flying Abject Foundation (UFA), wants to be perceived as a place for queers rather than for lesbians. It has been established by women, many of who identify as anarcho-feminists in the first place, even if they are lesbians or queers. It organizes events for women, queers, and lesbians. However, because of the open nature of the place, some lesbians feel anxious about participating in these events, fearing that their presence might not be accepted by other attendants (Weseli, 2009).

The *Barbie Girls* cabaret group, which consists of four women, calls itself queer because of the use of cross-dressing elements in its shows. The performances are not subversive or political in character but focus on the common experiences of the lesbian and gay community and encourage lesbians and gays to laugh at themselves. The group’s skits comment on the lyrical and comical sides of everyday lesbian life, lesbian and gay organizations’ activism, and important historical figures who are supposed to have been homosexual. The artists add queer ambiguous bias to these common topics. If the character is a butch female, she acts like a femme and vice versa, and if a girl makes a confession before a priest, despite what is alluded to in the conversation, it turns out that she is not a lesbian but an alpinist. If a daughter comes out to her mother, it turns out that this is a double coming out because her mother is also a lesbian. With a pinch of auto-irony, the *Barbie Girls* try to fulfill the need for a shared sense of the lesbian experience and give rise to a lesbian identity, which is done with a combination of a queer philosophy questioning its very foundation.

Some lesbian activists, who became disenchanted with the low effectiveness of the lesbian and gay organizations’ activism, have tried to employ more radical actions similar to those embraced by the “scruffy” gay militants invading conservative events in the United States in the 1970s (D’Emilio, 1983, p. 235) and members of the Queer Nation and The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) organizations protesting against the state’s ignorance toward AIDS in the 1990s (Gamson, 1989). Anna Zawadzka, angry at the ban placed on the Equality March in Kraków in 2004, decided to join the street demonstration wearing a rainbow blouse and a helmet (Zawadzka, 2009). What was once an expression of anger and fear of hooligan attacks on

the march soon became her conscious image. Using it, she conducted a few radical actions. In front of TV cameras, she assaulted a conservative member of the Polish parliament and asked him uncomfortable questions about the rights of homosexuals. In June 2009, she invaded the Congress of Polish Women in Warsaw and asked the current and former Polish president's wives, who were present on the stage, whether they supported the introduction of same-sex partnerships into Polish law (Pochrzęst, 2009). While neatly dressed and well-behaved gay activists, who are trying to get their message out through the mass media, have gone unnoticed, Zawadzka, thanks to her controversial image, has been able to catch the attention of the media more successfully.

As advanced and sophisticated as queer theory and politics might be, it has grown out of certain social and political contexts and is strictly bound to the Western gay culture and scholarship. The way queer philosophy is presented by Polish scholars and the usage of queer as a new kind of sexual identity by Polish lesbians show that the meaning of philosophical and cultural concepts may change with geographical and social settings. New applications imbue the old concepts with different meanings and social functions. This in general can be also said about the usage of the Internet as a new medium of communication changing the character and outcomes of the community-building and sexual identity formation processes.

THE INTERNET AND IDENTITY BUILDING: THE CASE OF LESBIANS IN POLAND

If we define community as “networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity” (Wellman, 2001, p. 228), it can be argued that cyber communication has changed the way communities function nowadays. Internet usage especially has shifted interpersonal communication from person-to-person ties to more specialized and role-to-role interactions. While it afforded more mobility, versatile connections, autonomy, agency and individualization, the ubiquity of communication based on different role-playing can also be viewed as a cause of decomposing identity of the person as a whole. For a person engaged in Internet communication becomes only a sum of her roles and a feeling of fragmentation and isolation may appear.

Internet groups and cyber communities, usually based on common interests, provide information, places for exchanging ideas but also decrease the need for a sense of belonging or identification with the group. Usually electronic communication cannot substitute real-life relations but rather enhances them and fills in the gaps. Face-to-face and personalized relationships are still the imperative for maintaining strong social ties. An online lesbian community study (Nip, 2004) confirms that electronic networks help

to strengthen offline communities and provide a sense of belonging only if the participants of the Internet communication have the same goals and norms as the members of the offline community.

The introduction of the Internet as a new medium of communication gave Polish LGBT people the opportunity to pursue their agenda in a more successful and effective way. Thanks to the specific character of the Internet and its combination of the anonymity of the closet with the openness of public space, members of sexual minorities can experiment with expressing their sexual desires and identities without risking immediate social condemnation. Internet-based social contacts offer a sense of intimacy and privacy while, at the same time, they provide an open space for everyone. As meeting places, clubs, and bars for lesbians are rare in Poland, using the Internet enables making personal contacts. Discussion websites allow them to freely exchange ideas and find support from other women with similar experiences, without fear of public exposure. Polish lesbians prefer this kind of communication to the workshops and support groups offered by lesbian and gay and feminist organizations (Weseli, 2009).

Thanks to virtual communication, finding friends and places to go has become a lot easier, especially for those women who live in small towns and in the countryside, and who have had no previous contact with lesbian and gay organizations. Mailing lists or contacts through lesbian websites serve as starting points for meetings in the real world: picnics, discos, football matches, music concerts with drag king performances, friendships, and love affairs. The Internet is used more as a way of socializing than a springboard for political activism. Still, for Polish lesbians, Internet contacts are mostly used as a means of finding a partner and then to hide away with her in the closet (Gruszczyńska, 2003, 2006).

The virtual space of the Internet also provides Polish lesbians with the opportunity to publish their own writings. Writing stories allows them to “recognize the lesbian in themselves” (Kulpa & Warkocki, 2003) and publishing them is a way to communicate with other women who also try to define their experiences. Love for women creates a common platform of understanding with readers. Most of these writings are “autobiographical, love-centered, and focused on the woman’s body” and “describe lesbian existence and experience without any social or political context” (Weseli, 2006). They are mostly written in the first person, and full of everyday life details and descriptions of feelings such as: “coming out stories, betrayals, quests for supreme love, troubles with finding partners and internet acquaintances, relationships with married women, life between man and woman, Church and religion, sometimes entire biographies in a not-too-easy to swallow pill” (Weseli, 2006).

The Internet is a medium of self-discovery, self-expression, and of defining and embracing sexual identity. It is also a place of coming out for Polish lesbians and gay men. In this sense, it has diverted this “coming out” rite

of passage, which is believed to be the crowning of a typical gay person's life path: questioning one's sexuality, confirming and embracing homosexual desires, coming out to family members and friends, and then contacting the lesbian and gay community (Eliason, 2007). Now, through YouTube and the comingout.blox.pl website, Polish gay men and women can upload their videos with coming out statements just with a single mouse-click. A virtual coming out can be a way of expressing one's voice, which does not conform to mainstream culture, and testing it in an anonymous environment. Gay and lesbian authors of Internet blogs write about their coming out stories without the fear of being rejected. Thanks to commentaries entered by sympathetic readers, they receive support, which helps them create an affirmative sexual identity (Gruszczyńska, 2007).

Nevertheless, Internet communities can only partially fulfill the condition of being a beacon for lesbian identity (Phelan, 1994), for although it attracts lesbians, the Internet allows them to maintain anonymous. The social functions of the electronic media are limited because identity formation means more than only sharing information. Face-to-face interaction, as well as mutual observation and a common definition of the situation are equally important parts of this process, and these can be afforded only by social gatherings. And finally, if the community is strong and large in numbers, it may provide a base for political mobilization to challenge the status of lesbians in society. For this purpose, a more tangible social and political entity is necessary than just a virtual lesbian community.

Born in a very conservative society, with very low recognition of women's rights, and exposed to the Western gay and queer culture, Polish lesbians try to find on the Internet their own voice, love, and happiness, and to resist homophobia. With little institutional infrastructure on offer in the country, the Internet provides most of what is needed: information, communication conduits, means of socializing and mutual support exchange. For those who are undecided, it provides the basic information on homosexuality; for those who already live their lives as lesbians, it connects their social ties with a broader lesbian world. Yet, however helpful Internet communication might be, it cannot be a substitute for a real-life community. For it provides a sense of belonging only to a small extent and it does not refer to a specific group of people to identify with.

CONCLUSION

Lesbian community had been non-existent during the communist era and is still not distinctly visible in Poland. Twenty years after the change of the political system, a new generation of lesbians—now coming of age—is trying to define their sexualities and find others with whom to identify. Though suppressed by Polish nationalism and social prejudices, lesbian activism has

shifted from, and gone beyond, providing mutual support against homophobia, to more diffuse Internet-based social bonding, engagement in political activities, and the use of cultural means of expression. While the Internet provides them with efficient tools of communication, it cannot substitute for real-life contacts or bring a sense of community.

Lesbians in Poland are trying to find a space for themselves in society through socializing, engaging in identity work and self-reflection. Although the history and culture of the Western lesbian and gay movements provide ready-made patterns of homosexual identity, it cannot be automatically assumed that lesbian identity will take the same shape everywhere. As sociological analyses of sexual identity politics show, the cultural meaning of sexuality is socially and politically contingent (Bernstein, 1997, 2002, 2005). Sexual identity formation and social group's identity politics depends profoundly on external political context and internal community struggles and in Poland that is not different.

NOTE

1. Events accompanying the equality and tolerance marches in Poland, which used to be called *Days of Lesbian and Gay Culture*, are now called *Days of Queer Culture*.

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