

THREE WAVES OF HOMOSEXUAL EMANCIPATION IN POLAND

LGBT emancipatory discourses have today become one of the most important socio-political symptoms on the global map of dependencies, including postcolonial and neocolonial (Puar 2007). They can be presented as a mark of modernity or of the backwardness of a particular society. They can be “another” national discourse, even as an object of hate, or they can sometimes be an instrumentally used element of national discourse, whose real aim is to oppress some other minority, as indicated by Judith Butler in her book, *Frames of War*. Lately, these discourses have become the building blocks in the construction of the West-East divide. Perhaps we find ourselves in a critical moment of this process. The European Union supports the legalization of same-sex marriages, whereas the Eurasian Union, the brainchild of Vladimir Putin, is in favor of restrictions on what they call homosexual propaganda.

We should certainly not essentialize the relation of various societies to the gay-lesbian issue, which is why I would like to approach emancipation in Poland within a historical context and outline at least three decades worth of homosexual/gay activism. A counterpoint to this conceptualization will be the idea presented in *De-centering Western Sexualities. Central and Eastern European Perspectives* edited by Joanna Mizielińska and Ropert Kulpa, especially in their article: “Contemporary Peripheries: Queer Studies, Circulation of Knowledge and

East/West Divide". According to them, the "geo-temporal modalities" of the West and East differ in that the West is a "time of sequence" and the East a "time of coincidence", where every state of emancipation appears simultaneously. I would like to fracture this essentialized image and historicize the emancipatory discourse. This is not to provide a description of "lag" in relation to the West, but more about grasping the specificity of the local emancipatory dynamics.

Its reconstruction is not the easiest of tasks, because Polish institutionalized historiography almost completely ignores the homosexual context of history. This is certainly a blank spot, even though Poland is an exceptionally fruitful subject for such an inquiry. Poland has a very liberal penal code (from 1932), which decriminalized same-sex intercourse between adults. However, according to Monika Płatek, a criminal lawyer, despite such liberal laws (compared to other European countries), a certain kind of penalization still exists in the guise of punishments for homosexual prostitution, a crime for which one could have been easily prosecuted, considering that it was possible to construe accepting an invitation to a café or to the theatre as profit, thus indicating prostitution. However, this law was removed from the penal code in 1969, which entered into force in 1970. Therefore, at least in theory, the Polish People's Republic brought about the complete depenalization of sexual relations among people of the same sex (Płatek 2009). In the context of European and American law, Polish law appeared very progressive, though it should be emphasized that the lives of nonheterosexual people were anything but colorful, because homosexuality in everyday life was still considered pathological and taboo. And this state of affairs was an issue that doubtlessly connected the government of the People's Republic of Poland with the discourse of the Polish Catholic church. Emancipatory activities, therefore, did not center around the issues connected with sex (as this was legal in Poland) but on a whole array of issues which could be called, in the Hegelian tradition, "recognition" (*Anerkennung*) of a different, but decent life (Fraser, Honneth: 2005).

The emancipation waves¹ meshed with the next decades. This periodization could be summarily presented in the following way:

¹ I originally introduced the concept of "emancipation waves" in a German magazine, *Polen unter dem Regenbogen. Die drei Emanzipationswellen der Schwulen in Polen*. "Jahrbuch Polen" 2014. The outline of this concept appeared in my book (Warkocki 2013).

1. 1981 – 1989 – earlier stage of emancipation “different”
2. 1990 – 2003 – gay and lesbian emancipation
3. 2003 – till today – visibility in public discourse, the politicization of homophobia, homosexuals as objects of contempt in the nationalist discourse

The 1980s saw a kind of social liberalization in the People’s Republic of Poland, as topics which had been ignored earlier (among these, for example, was the issue of Polish-Jewish relations). It is, therefore, worth noticing that the beginning of the 1980s inaugurated two works which overtly thematize distinct (though similar) versions of masculine homosexual identity. On the one hand, we have Julian Strykowski’s long novel, *Tommaso del Cavaliere* (1981), and a short story, *Rudolf* (1980), by Marian Pankowski, who at the time was an emigrant residing in Brussels. The first story is about a brilliant artist, Michael Angelo, seen from the perspective of his overlooked student; the second is about the meeting of an exemplary professor with a German homosexual (in Polish literature, homosexuals were often depicted as foreigners), who took great pleasure in remaining on the margins of society (which of course shocked the professor).

Both of these works could be construed as existential propositions for homosexual men; in fact, these were the only valid possibilities, given the very meager palate of available roles. In short then: Artist or Pervert, compensation through art or hypocritically remaining at the margins of society. *Tertium not datur*. The literature from the turn of the 80s and 90s (such as Grzegorz Musiał’s *W ptaszarni* (*In the Aviary*), Marcin Krzeszowiec’s *Ból istnienia* (*The Pain of Existence*) and Marek Nowakowski’s *Grecki bōzek* (*The Greek Divinity*) illustrated just how inadequate this palette of possibilities is. Especially significant here is Krzeszowiec’s novel. His protagonist is neither an Artist nor a Pervert. Krzeszowiec presents a painfully emerging proposition for a new form of existence and identity: gay. Thus, a new decade was inaugurated (this novel was written at the end of the 80s and was published in 1992).

This is how the issue of identity appears from the point of view of literature. However, it should be remembered that the eighties are

This periodization in the context of other propositions has been analyzed by Łukasz Szulc. *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland. Cross-border Flows in Gay and Lesbian Magazines*. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

replete with many traces of increased interest in this topic. The historical perspective of this topic was analyzed by Agata Fiedotow in her article “Początki ruchu gejowskiego w Polsce (1981–1990)” (“The Beginnings of the Gay Movement in Poland (1981–1990)”). Most importantly, something had changed in the political discourse. According to Fiedotow, the topic of homosexuality appeared during the period 1981–1989 about one hundred times; this is insignificant compared to what appeared in 1990, but very significant compared to what appeared before the 1980s. It was during this time that Barbara Pietkiewicz feature story, “Gorzki fiolet” (“Bitter violet”), was published in *Polityka* in 1981, i.e. in a mainstream, widely read weekly.

I would also like to mention Krzysztof Darski’s (pen name Dariusz Prorok) article, fittingly titled “We’re different”, which also appeared in *Polityka* (1985), and is considered to be the first Polish gay emancipation manifesto. The following is a fragment from this article:

Ridiculed and pushed off to the margins of society, discriminated against by every (without exception) institution and social organization, persecuted by homophobes, assaulted physically and verbally by brute morons with the tacit approval of the authorities of this world, isolated and abandoned by their country, church and science [...]. Do homosexuals have any rights in our country? Is there anyone interested in helping them in their obvious personal troubles? Is anyone concerned about maintaining the stability of a relationship between two men? (Darski 8)

One of the most mysterious issues concerning homosexual men in the People’s Republic of Poland was a nationwide operation code-named “Hyacinth”. It targeted this community and took place near the end of 1985 (and was repeated a few times), carried out by the Citizen’s Militia and (most likely) by the Security Service. Not much is still known about this operation. Though the Communist era of the People’s Republic of Poland has become a subject of intensive research in Poland (even the “Syrenka” automobile has its own monograph), the persecution of homosexuals has not yet received competent historical attention, though it is known that during the whole communist period the Intelligence Service invigilated homosexual men (for example, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Jerzy Andrzejewski and Michel Foucault) and a list of homosexuals was also compiled. Operation Hyacinth could have merely been a result of the intensification of these activities; its aim could have been connected to their peculiarly

understood notion of HIV/AIDS prevention, or it could have been an attempt to quell the first homosexual initiatives.

Who were these sexual queers of the 1980s? How did they see themselves, how did they define themselves? Agata Fiedotow's work provides us with interesting insights. It turns out that activists affiliated with the International Gay Association (IGA)² created a special cell which maintained lines of communication with the countries of the Communist Bloc – East Europe Information Pool (EEIP), whose task was to gather information about the legal and social situation of homosexual people and to establish contact with them. EEIP was created alongside the Austrian organization Homosexuelle Initiative Wien (HOSI) associated with IGA, and the coordinator was a Pole living in Vienna, Andrzej Selerowicz, which perhaps explains why contact with Poland were the most intense.

Fiedotow analyzed around 280 letters written during the 1980s to the representatives of EEIP and letters written to teen magazines *Razem* and *Na przelaj*. These sources provide an insight into the sad autobiography of homosexuals. Fiedotow points to the characteristic topoi: hostility and intolerance of the surroundings (but also poor living conditions – in complaints sent to Western organizations), constant fear and anxiety (the recurrent *topos* of paranoia), feelings of isolation, mental breakdown (alcoholism, depression, suicide), though sometimes – far more seldom – acceptance of one's sexuality ("I'm ok with this"). She also describes the various strategies of concealment, ranging from double lives in heterosexual marriages (Darski claims that most homosexuals in Poland were married) to solitude by choice.

The most interesting project on the part of EEIP was that of social demarginalization – an attempt to apply gay identity and the concomitant movement to the social situation during the last years of the Communist era. However, this attempt resulted in an absolute fiasco, because it was at odds with the reality of life in Poland. The Western activists were surprised by the resistance towards grassroots social initiatives not only from the government but also from the activists themselves, who were hesitant to formalize their activity (which would, of course, entail having to go public). For a long time, homosexual groups retained a predominantly social function, where "our

² From 1986 this organization goes by the name of ILGA – International Lesbian and Gay Association.

issues” could be discussed. Collecting contact information raised suspicions. The editor of the EEIP bulletin became for his readers a kind of friend and advisor rather than a potential leader of a gay movement. Building gay identity (openness, pride, relationships) and raising public awareness, in contrast to the image of “homosexual cruising” based on casual sex, ended in failure.

What was not successful by the end of the 1980s was gradually coming to fruition in the following decade. The 1990s saw the advancement of the gay rights movement and the stabilization of gay identity.

Let us start from the beginning. Firstly, freedom of association rights were changed, giving the regional courts, and not, as had been the case thus far, the administrative government the right to legalize associations. This gave way to the formation of Lambda in 1990. In some larger cities there appeared a semi-open infrastructure of social life. And what was certainly the most influential in its effects was the appearance of magazines geared towards homosexuals. Some were very ephemeral, others lasted for a long time, like the magazine *Inaczej* published in Poznań (twelve years). One cannot overestimate their significance. These were not pornographic magazines; they were distributed by “Ruch”, making them available all over Poland. Though these magazines were not sold in villages and small towns, their availability was nonetheless quite good, which is why they were able to play the role of a course book for gay identity.

It is worth considering the words that homosexuals used to identify one another, to describe their own identity. During the 1980s the words “different” was frequently used. In some letters to the representatives of EEIP the words “homosexual” did not appear at all; instead, “different” was used as a positive euphemistic self-description (“I’m different”). Prorok’s manifesto mentioned above was titled “We are different”. And the Poznań-based magazine, established in 1990, was called “*Inaczej*” (“*Differently*”). Difference and otherness appear, therefore, to be a key to the identity of that time, and, at the same time, suggest a positive auto-definition in the absence of other non-derogatory terms. At the end of the 1980s the word “gay” appeared in Poland. First editions of magazines presented the literal assimilation of this word. They used the adjective “gayowski”, which with time changed to “gejowski”. This, however, was not just a word but also a whole identity project, which was concealed behind this term and

developed during the whole period of the 1990s and in the following decade.

This project never became the subject of a historical-sociological description and analysis, despite the abundance of necessary source material: magazine editions, the discussions that were found there, as well as numerous letters to the editor. This would have certainly been an interesting contribution to a study of Poland during the transformation period. Some things should be pointed out. First, the American emancipation tradition proved important, especially the “Stonewall myth”, that is, an event that was meant to be a turning point. These events were often evoked with the expectation that in Poland something similar could (alternatively: could not) happen. The second issue concerns a kind of separatism between gays and lesbians, who constituted somewhat separate social groups with different social agendas. An expression of this separatism was to be found in *Inaczej* magazine, which had a predominantly gay focus with only a few pages devoted to lesbians. It should be added that the 1990s was a decade when lesbian identity in Poland clearly stabilized. This crystallization of the still pre-political lesbian identity was addressed during the 1990s by Joanna Mizielińska (Mizielińska 1999).

And the most important matter, i.e. “the homosexual question” during the nineties, did not resonate as an important social concern in public discourse. Journalists did not even consider asking politicians about their attitude to the legalization of same-sex partnerships or marriage. This concern was regarded as socially marginal and apolitical, something which was to radically change after 2003.

Let us refer once again to the literature of the last decade of the twentieth century. At the beginning of this decade, a quasi-emancipatory prose came into being, which went completely unnoticed by the critics. We can list Marcin Krzeszowiec’s lengthy *Ból istnienia* (1992), Antoni Romanowicz’s *Nie znany świat* (1992), Tadeusz Gorgol’s *Zakazaną miłość* (1990), Witold Jabłoński’s *Gorące uczynki* (1989). These books tend to be depressing, because they illustrate the difficult state of homosexuality during the Communist era (it is then that they were written, though it was Third Polish Republic that allowed them to come into existence materially, though they remained unnoticed). Their characters say: yes, we’re homosexual. Look how bad we have it (because indeed they did), understand us (this however never hap-

pened). It should be reiterated here that a new identity crystalized – gay (not the modernist homosexual).

Polish lesbian literature from the 1990s did not have a similar point of origin. The most substantial author was (and still is) Ewa Schillig, who in 1998 published *Lustro* (Mirror). This was the first Polish collection of short stories, in which the protagonist was always a lesbian (though it is not initially known which one, which contributes to the suspense). With time, the lesbian subject acquired a more distinct cultural articulation and, what is interesting, this occurred especially in poetry, for example in Ewa Sonnenberg's *Planeta* (Planet) (1997), Inga Iwasiów's *Miłość* (Love) (2000) and Izabela Filipiak's *Madame Intuita* (2002).

If one were to look for a watershed date, it would be (though of course tentatively) 2003. It was then that posters of same-sex couples were hung in some Polish cities as part of the campaign "Niech nas zobaczą" ("Let them see us"). Unfortunately, it did take too long before they were torn down. Karolina Breguła's whole artistic project was on display in a few galleries in Poland. Fifteen male and fifteen female couples, usually young and from large cities, are photographed holding hands and looking at us. These portraits incited a heated discussion and provoked extraordinary controversy. They were a symptom of something new: the issue of homosexuality broke through to the public discourse and became political. With time it succumbed to commercialization.

During this period a new gay-lesbian organization appeared, Kampania Przeciw Homofobii (Campaign Against Homophobia). Its name indicates a certain change in emancipatory thinking. The problem ceased to be "the homosexual", whose normality had to be argued; in this new approach the problem was the prejudice towards nonheterosexual people, i.e. homophobia.

Homosexuality became one of the incendiary points of national identity. And from this perspective – national – homosexuals started to be perceived as "other" (no longer as "different" like from the 1980s). This became especially visible during the banned Equality Parades. Przemysław Czapliński writes about this: "In the collective narration the sexual queer was shifted from the position of "different" to the position of "other", for which the most explicit example was the conduct of the police on November 19, 2005 in Poznań.

The [Equality] March was stopped by a countermarch – their participants were hurling insults, yelling “Pedały do gazu” (“Gas the gays”) and “Zrobimy z wami co Hitler z Żydami” (“We’ll do to you what Hitler did to the Jews”). The police did not take any action against the demonstrators yelling the anti-Semitic and homophobic insults, but instead arrested 64 participants of the Equality March. It could be said that those who were hurling insults were testing their right to define Others – they learned that this behavior is not only allowed by even legally protected (Czapliński 119).

Indeed, Equality Marches and Equality Parades – representing a kind of politics of visibility – turned out to be particularly important for the third wave of emancipation. It should be added that these parades did not immediately draw media attention. It was not until they were banned (first in Warsaw in 2004 by then-mayor Lech Kaczyński) that the gay and lesbian struggle for equality and recognition attracted media attention and became a politically divisive issue. At the same time, it was then that a homophobic narrative with the homosexual as “other” was generated. Its extreme versions are visible today. Sometimes it is possible to have the impression that the current type of homophobia residing in right-wing media has exceeded all limits of decency and has acquired the appearance of a pogrom narrative.

For gay identity, the new decade, especially after 2003, brought with it changes. First of all, the technological revolution was under way, offering new and effective tools in the struggle for emancipation. The Internet and its possibilities assumed the task of mediating this activism as well as of sustaining a new gay and lesbian identity. At the same time, however, it killed off the paper press along with the previous gay identity that developed around it from the 1990s (because there was also a generation change). Transgender activism, especially around the *Tras-fuzja* organization (Anna Grodzka was earlier its chairwoman), was slowly becoming more visible.

Gay and lesbian literature, which, unlike its predecessors from a decade ago, was noticed, read and analyzed, because the social context gave it a particular significance. Michał Witkowski’s *Lubiewo* (2004) garnered particular critical attention. This was a camp story about homosexuals longing for the Communist People’s Republic of Poland, who cannot and would not adjust to the new capitalist reality, because, as indicated by research, social-economical stratification intensified in Poland, increasingly destabilizing the liberal subject of

gay-lesbian politics. In other words, it was difficult to talk about a stable gay identity or an “image of a typical gay person”, when economic and class differences have such an influence on that identity. Political interests also have a differentiation effect.

This phenomenon is reflected by the literature of the third wave of emancipation. Michał Witkowski’s *Lubiewo*, published in the first half of the new century, referred to the end of the 80s and – what is less obvious though still clear – also to the 90s and dealt with a very important identity opposition: “gej vs ciota” (gay vs fag) that was constructed within the context of Polish transformation. It is not difficult to notice that the offensive word “ciota” (“fairy”, “fag”) in the Polish language – apart from connotations with male homosexuality – means “frajer” (“sucker”, “pushover”), that is, someone who is a failure. *Lubiewo* can be, therefore, read as a story about the winners and losers during the Polish transformation written in a language of quasi-identity of homosexuals. In this version, “gays” are those who were not successful, they are the potential beneficiaries of the political change. One can only regret that in sociological analyses this class void in relation to homosexual identity (forming in the context of increasing economical stratification) rarely became a subject of constructive reflection in Polish *queer studies*.

This situation is presented differently in Paweł Demirski’s *Tęczowa Trybuna 2012*, a parallel text written almost a decade later, which, as a kind of national drama, was brought to the stage by Monika Strzępka³. This is a story written from the margins of the national community, because undoubtedly only there can we find gay football fans demanding seats for the Euro 2012, which took place in Poland. Here, “gays” are represented as the losers of 1990s social modernization, who nonetheless constantly (yet without success) aspire to middle-class status. What is more, it turns out that in terms of the neoliberal and conservative hegemony, the interests of gay football fans and artist from the upper class are definitely different.

Tęczowa Trybuna 2012 is written with Paweł Demirski’s particular “superconscious” style, as if he had taken Masłowska’s cue, where

³ The preview showing took place on March 5, 2011 in the Polish Theater in Wrocław. Worth mentioning is that *Tęczowa Trybuna*, along with six other, classic Polish modern plays, was removed from the playbill in 2016 as part of the political “good change” and fight against degenerate art (Soszyński 2016).

“the ear decides the style”, and “poetry slips into discourse” (Wojciechowska 36). This is also definitely a political play. A group of football fans wants to find their own place, where they could be themselves and feel safe. They want a rainbow and free stadium. And the word “trybuna”⁴ sounds very symbolic here, making all these pursuits look like an allegory, an allegory of the pursuits of any emancipatory group in Poland. What are they doing? Well, they are living in a free and democratic Poland won through the great sacrifices of their fathers and mothers.

It quickly becomes clear that their struggle for freedom is not the next chapter of the story of the struggle for freedom against the evil communist regime. On the stage, a projector showing street riots that took place during the marches, also from the 1980s. What is more, the characters as part of their own activities become unwittingly entangled in the reconstruction of the riots from the 1980s, organized by one of the main antagonists, President Hania, on the occasion of the grand opening of an airport. The message of this fragment is clear: yesterday’s opponents are often today’s oppressors. This is why the scene where the gay demonstrations are being dispersed, where the actors are falling down in slow motion and retreating, looks like one huge romantic irony.

Tęczowa Trybuna (Rainbow Tribune) 2012 perfectly sums up emancipatory activities as well as reactions to them, especially in Ikona’s ambivalent monologue concluding the play, which was inspired by Roy Cohn’s famous monologue in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*. Cohn was a dark character, a homosexual occupying the highest seats in the government, displaying a conservative image and absolute hypocrisy – and at the same time the biggest active homophobe. Ikona is one of the boys from this group, who – to recontextualize Cohn’s whole monologue – sums up the activities of *Tęczowa Trybuna* and, at the same time, in a cynical and abbreviated manner, sums up the activities of all homosexual emancipatory groups which trusted the democratic rules of Poland. That is, formally, they were unable to achieve what is the litmus test of democracy in Poland. At the same time, there is a characteristic semantic shift in the text, which is played on in many fragments of the play. “Homosexual”, “fag” and

⁴ This is because in Polish the “trybuna” has two meanings: the English tribune with its political connotations and bleachers in a stadium.

other synonyms have different, context-dependent, meanings. The semantic ambiguity of this insulting word puts the existing categories under scrutiny and redirects us to other social distinctions. And this way, in Ikona's last paradoxical exclamation, he insults his own friends by calling them "fags", implying that they are not so much "homosexuals" as "losers". The consistent emancipatory struggle for recognition was pulled apart by economic mechanisms and the class structure. The Polish Cohn says this directly that in the face of democratic deficiencies and the economic stratification resulting from neoliberal economics the gay freedom of being oneself (just like everything else) has to be bought.

This play could, therefore, be read as a criticism of neoliberal discourse in Poland. Today, however, primary importance is definitely accorded to the nationalistic-catholic discourse. When we consider its main manifestations, such as burning Judyta Wójciak's work "Tęcza" during The Independence March 2013, or the well-organized ideological offensive called "battle with gender ideology" (which had a clearly homophobic subtext and agenda), the search for a "homosexual lobby" in the theater (or in the Catholic Church) or also the actions and statements made by the Polish nationalists, we will quickly notice that homosexuals are constructed as Others nationally and, at the same time, a politically useful object of hatred.

Thus, we have come from the invisible gays and lesbians to visibility; from the pre-political stage to the politicization of homosexuals and homophobia; from a liberal subject of emancipation to its criticism. One thing is certain: much is ahead of us.

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