

FOREWORD

This is a wonderful book with a beautiful title that addresses an essential topic: gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual worlds and rights in Eastern Europe.

My first pink experience beyond the Iron Curtain was the conference on Sexual Minorities in Tallinn, 1990. Entering the Soviet Union by way of Moscow, the male customs officer did not know what to do with the gay studies books I had brought with me for the organizers. Asking his superior, a typical “strong woman” of the former Soviet states who looked like a butch lesbian in her cute socialist uniform, she decided that “times have changed and we now have to discuss such themes.” And I could continue with my luggage, containing the contraband of a very recent past. Arriving in Tallinn, the first thing the organizers offered the foreign guests was a city tour. Some Russian guys followed and we engaged in a conversation. At some point, they asked very timidly whether we, the Westerners, were ourselves homosexual. Most of us were, so we could give a positive answer, and yes, they themselves were also gay, as they subsequently confirmed at our request. The unimaginable for them was, we began to understand later, that experts on homosexual issues were openly gay or lesbian. In the former Soviet Union the specialists were mainly straight homophobic doctors.

Times have changed enormously because in this collection most authors are queer or queer-friendly. And they no longer discuss the social dangers of, and cures for homosexuality, but the oppressive situation and the rights of LGBT people. Many things have taken a positive turn. This collection shows all the new and rich developments. There are now gay bars and disco’s, LGBT organizations, supportive books in most languages that discuss the past and present of gay and lesbian cultures. There are cultural festivals and parades. Internet now offers the opportunity to explore homosexuality in cyberspace before getting to the real stuff of bars and bodies. Transsexuals have rights to medical care, although it continues to be complicated to find your way in the medico-legal and financial labyrinths of sex change. Transgenders are subjects of movies; gays and lesbians have become visible in the press. A serious complaint about the media is the focus on news and soaps that originate

from Western-Europe and the USA and have little local relevance. At the same time the European Union shines like a light in the dark as it has imposed equal rights legislation for gays and lesbians in those countries of the East that have become member states or want to be included. In the West, we are very curious whether the new members will contribute to a conservative majority in the EU that opposes or neglects gay and lesbian rights, or whether they will take a sex-liberal turn and also realize the social support for sexual diversity that is now enshrined in their laws only by legal obligation.

All the glorious new developments in the new democracies should not occlude the situation where large parts of the populations have negative attitudes about homosexuals. In the West, gays and lesbians long had the impression that they were a victorious minority that was on its way to full legal and social equality. In the EU, most countries seem to be on course to eliminate the final inequalities of the past, the most important being that same-sex couples had no rights to marry or adopt children. The legal progress however, obscured that the social developments did not keep pace with the legal, or that all social institutions remained heteronormative, perhaps with a place at the table for the queer individual, but with no incentive to open up for sexual and gender diversity. In nearly all schools, families, political parties, municipalities, workplaces, care institutions, sport clubs, on the streets, heterosexuality has remained the norm and homosexuality the neglected exception while sexual pleasure remains a taboo topic notwithstanding all the media's ravenous attraction to sex. The strict gender dichotomy, problematic for both transgenders and homosexuals, remains enshrined in society. Even in Western Europe, the LGBT movement has to go a long way to create real sexual and gender diversity.

This collection shows the progress being made in Eastern Europe and the obstacles that are being faced: from Belarus where gays and lesbian have to fear for their lives via the revulsion and rejection by Catholics and nationalists in other places, to the neglect by social institutions or the general public elsewhere. Homosexuality was and continues to be seen as a danger for the social body, mistakenly proscribed in European laws, as a contagious disease that endangers young people, while all churches railed against the sinful behaviour of queers. It is a difficult, but not hopeless situation given the development of LGBT worlds and movements everywhere and the presence of allies from inside or abroad.

An interesting project for the future is to study how much has changed since the fall of the Iron Curtain. How oppressive was the situation under communism when there were perhaps few queer bars and no gay move-

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ments, but nevertheless urinals and small circles of trustworthy friends? Communist states were definitely not gay-friendly, but what about the “strong women” who would now be seen as transgenders or butch lesbians? Some states had anti-homosexual laws, but others had none. How much tolerance existed for the private problem that someone had homosexual or lesbian inclinations? The story of 71-year old Thorsten from an East-German village (in Jörgens’ chapter) indicates that a gay couple could live an unnoticed life. The communist states were largely organized along homosocial lines, always an interesting playground for homosexual desires. There must have been an enormous variation in the treatment of LGBT people in a situation where the relevant issues were often silenced or remained unspoken.

There is an interesting rule of history that progress made in the past may become an impediment in the present, and vice versa. It could well be that the stagnation of the LGBT movements in Western Europe, still kept alive by the gracious grants of governments, may make them fade away in the near future with no one combating social heteronormativity or a new conservatism that opposes sexual hedonism and visibility. While in Eastern Europe these still new and vibrant queer movements open up new venues and situations for queering society beyond the old sexual conservatism of a vanishing generation, hanging on to its old-fashioned communist, Catholic or Orthodox anti-gay dogmas. The future will have many surprises and it is likely that more of them come from the East than from the West as the latter is suffocating in its passive complacency about same-sex marriages, equal rights laws or being openly gay. These half baked successes may turn against Western gays and lesbians, while the abjection of the East might strengthen the queer community in its political and artistic endeavours. So it might be very worthwhile for the LGBT movements of the West to look with curiosity to their sisters in the East, instead of only lecturing them about LGBT organizing. Let them all read this book.

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