

Roman Kuhar and Judit Takács

Introduction to the thematic block / Uvodnik v tematski blok:

HOMOPHOBIA – A UNIFYING EXPERIENCE? / Homofobija – izkušnja, ki povezuje?

In her criticism of gay and lesbian identity politics, Judith Butler famously claimed that the only unifying experience of the LGBT community, which is as diverse as life itself, is the experience of homophobia (Butler 1991). Although it is hard to challenge this observation, there seem to be radically different experiences in how one is faced with homophobia. BBC radio journalist Scott Mills, for example, starts his documentary *The World's Worst Place to Be Gay* (Follmer 2011) about prosecution of homosexuals in Uganda by an assessment that he, as a gay man, has never really experienced any violent homophobic reactions. He admits he never really gave it a lot of thought until he was forced to flee Uganda after revealing his sexual orientation to Uganda's MP David Bahati, the author of the so called "Kill the gays" bill, which specifies the death penalty for homosexual behaviour (Conaway 2010).

Recent developments in Russia, where Putin has pushed a series of three anti-gay laws through the Duma, are other examples of homophobia. The first law of the three prohibits discussions about homosexuality, classifying it as "homosexual propaganda" which, according to the law, equals pornography. Furthermore, Russian police officers were given power to arrest anyone, including tourists, if they suspect them to be LGBT or pro-gay. Finally, Putin also signed a law, which bans adoption of children from Russia by gay couples and by anyone from states where gay marriage is legal (Fierstein 2013). In these legal and social circumstances homophobia flourishes. The most recent media report is about a gay activist, who was killed by Russian neo-Nazis, while the police turned a blind eye on this violence, which was publicly broadcast on the Internet (Schroeder 2013). This death follows one similar in May 2013 when a 23-year old man was beaten, beer bottles were shoved into his anus, after revealing that he was gay, and finally the perpetrators crushed his head with a heavy stone (Grove and Gutterman, 2013).

The Russian situation has received a lot of media attention due to the fact that the 2014 Winter Olympics will take place in Sochi, Russia. For now, the Russian administration has sent out contradictory messages about whether the anti-gay legislation will also apply to sportsmen and sportswomen and spectators at the Olympics. In a passionate and emotional open letter to the International Olympics Committee the British actor and writer Stephen Fry called for "an absolute ban on the Russian Winter Olympics of 2014" because of Russia's anti-gay laws:

I write in the earnest hope that all those with a love of sport and the Olympic spirit will consider the stain on the Five Rings that occurred when the 1936 Berlin Olympics proceeded under the exultant aegis of a tyrant who had passed into law, two years earlier, an act which singled out for special persecution a minority whose only crime was the accident of their birth. In his case he banned Jews from academic tenure or public office, he made sure that the police turned a blind eye to any beatings, thefts or humiliations afflicted on them, he burned and banned books written by them. [...] The Olympic movement at that time paid precisely no attention to this evil and proceeded with the notorious Berlin Olympiad, which provided a stage for a gleeful Führer and only increased his status at home and abroad. It gave him confidence. All historians are agreed on that. What he did with that confidence we all know. Putin is eerily repeating this insane crime, only this time against LGBT Russians. Beatings, murders and humiliations are ignored by the police. Any defence or sane discussion of homosexuality is against the law. [...] The IOC absolutely *must* take a firm stance on behalf of the shared humanity it is supposed to represent against the barbaric, fascist law that Putin has pushed through the Duma. Let us not forget that Olympic events used not only to be athletic, they used to include cultural competitions. Let us realise that in fact, sport *is* cultural. It does not exist in a bubble outside society or politics. The idea that sport and politics don't connect is worse than disingenuous, worse than stupid. It is wickedly, wilfully wrong. Everyone knows politics interconnects with everything for "politics" is simply the Greek for "to do with the people (Fry 2013).

As a reaction to all this, American president Obama has cancelled a bilateral US – Russia summit and a meeting with Putin during the G-20 economic summit (Ehrenfreund 2013). However, the USA cannot be seen as a heaven for LGBT people either. Although Obama has gone a long way from claiming that marriage is only between a man and a woman to defending marriage equality (Mears 2013), consider the following "legal confusion" a married same-sex couple has to deal with when travelling around the USA. Susan Sommer, director of constitutional litigation for Lambda Legal, explains the situation of a married same-sex couple from Washington D.C. taking a train from there to Boston:

You're married in D.C.; everything's fine. Next stop Maryland, which until 2010 wouldn't treat you as married but now would. You get to Delaware, which has a civil-union law, so it treats you not as married but as a civil-union couple. Then you get to Pennsylvania, which has not been recognizing these out-of-state marriages as anything at all, and not allowing divorces, so while there you are potentially a legal stranger to your spouse. That's not a good part of your trip. New Jersey recognizes your marriage only as a civil union. Then, phew, you're in New York and you're married again; same in Connecticut. Then you get to Rhode Island: a civil-union state where the attorney general has said you are married and the government is treating you as married, but the courts have said we won't divorce you. Finally, you reach Massachusetts, and you can breathe a sigh of relief: You're married. And you can divorce. But it's a very complicated legal ride (Green 2013).

Gay and lesbian couples in Europe can experience similar legal roller-coasters considering the fact that the EU Member States have a variety of family policy approaches, which are reflected in the national legislation as there is no EU-level unified family policy. Thus it is often debated especially in Eastern European countries, whether the legal institutions providing equal rights for same-sex couples with different sex couples

in the field of family and social policies can be introduced if homophobia prevails in a country: as if the validity of the equal rights principle depended on a given society's open-mindedness. On the other hand, it is hardly disputable that legal emancipation is a *necessary but not sufficient condition* for long-term social emancipation... In this context awareness-raising is of crucial importance: we have to keep discussing these themes and discursively transform them into components of public space – for which a forum is provided by this special issue of the *Družboslovne razprave*.

Gay and lesbian or LGBT studies and, more recently, queer studies have been developing and growing in Slovenia for over a decade. Abroad the tradition of these studies is much longer and has been overwhelmingly determined by American authors. The journal *Družboslovne razprave* has played its role in the development of these studies in Slovenia, publishing several original scientific articles, dealing with issues pertaining to LGBT studies. This specific issue, however, is the first one to include work from scholars from the region, presenting their own original research dealing with scientific appraisals of homophobia, same-sex families, homosexuality in school curricula and the role of the church in generating homophobic attitudes.

Judit Takács and Ivett Szalma compare attitudes on homophobia in 27 European countries, measured by different variables – “justification” of homosexuality, non-preference for homosexual neighbours and acceptance of gay men and lesbian women – within two large scale longitudinal surveys, the European Social Survey and the European Value Study. According to the findings Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Croatia, Lithuania and Estonia belong to the most homophobic countries (among the examined ones), where there is no same-sex partnership or parenting legislation in place, while Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and Norway seem to be the least homophobic ones, where various forms of same-sex partnership and parenting legislation are indeed in place. It can also be observed that the most homophobic countries are characterised by the highest levels of gender inequality, and the least homophobic ones by the least traditional views on gender relations.

The framework of Nataša Bijelić and Amir Hodžić's research on attitudes towards homosexuality in pupils and teachers in Croatian secondary schools, is an assessment that the school system as such is based on heteronormativity, which was clearly shown during the recent Croatian public debate on Health Education. In line with this, the study showed an omnipresence of homophobic stereotypes and prejudice in schools as both students and teachers hold highly discriminatory attitudes concerning visible/public expression of non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities. In addition, almost a third of all students reported using verbal/physical violence against a person because of their alleged homosexual orientation.

The latter is of big concern also for those pupils who might not be LGBT themselves, but are coming from same-sex families, an increasing phenomenon in Slovenia and elsewhere. This issue is addressed in an article by Ana M. Sobočan and Uli Streib Brzič, in which they analyse how children from same-sex families face the heteronormativity of schools. The authors found four typical strategies – disclosure, concealment, verbalisation and justification – which leads them to outline ideas on the resilience factors

against de-normalisation. They also emphasise the importance of children and youth not standing alone against it.

Finally, Miloš Jovanović addresses the role of the Church (particularly in Serbia) in generating homophobic attitudes. He points to an ambivalent attitude towards gay people that is usually expressed in the 'hate the sin, love the sinner' formula. There is also a different kind of ambivalence: the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as its faithful either stick to the 'policy of silence' regarding LGBT(Q) issues, or they resort to very strong moralistic judgements and condemnations.

References:

- Butler, Judith (1991): *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*. In: Diana Fuss (ed.): *Inside/Out (Lesbian theories, gay theories)*: 13-31. New York: Routledge.
- Conaway, Laura (2010): *The David Bahati Interview*. <http://maddowblog.msnbc.com/news/2010/12/09/5616533-the-david-bahati-interview> (10.8.2013).
- Ehrenfreund, Max (2013): *Obama cancels meeting with Vladimir Putin, criticizes Russian anti-gay legislation*. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/obama-cancels-meeting-with-vladimir-putin-criticizes-russian-anti-gay-legislation/2013/08/07/da43f24a-ff98-11e2-9711-3708310f6f4d_story.html (10.8.2013).
- Fierstein, Harvey (2013): *Russia's Anti-gay Crackdown*. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/22/opinion/russias-anti-gay-crackdown.html?_r=1& (10.8.2013).
- Follmer, Max (2011): *Gay BBC Reporter Scared Straight Out of Uganda*. <http://www.takepart.com/article/2011/02/11/gay-bbc-reporter-scared-straight-out-uganda> (10.8.2013).
- Fry, Stephen (2013): *An Open Letter to David Cameron and the IOC*. <http://www.stephenfry.com/2013/08/07/an-open-letter-to-david-cameron-and-the-ioc/> (10.8.2013).
- Green, Jesse (2013): *From "I Do" to "I'm Done"*. <http://nymag.com/news/features/gay-divorce-2013-3/> (10.8.2013).
- Grove, Thomas & Gutterman, Steve (2013): *Brutal torture, beating death of gay man in Russia sparks fears of more violence*. http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2013/05/13/brutal_torture_beating_death_of_gay_man_in_russia_sparks_fears_of_more_violence.html (10.8.2013).
- Mears, Bill (2013): *Obama views on same-sex marriage reflect societal shifts*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/03/22/politics/court-same-sex-obama> (10.8.2013).
- Schroeder, Audra (2013): *Gay teenager abused by Russian neo-Nazis reported dead*. <http://www.dailydot.com/crime/death-russian-neo-nazis-abuse-youtube/> (10.8.2013)