

« COMMUNIST HOMOSEXUALITY (1945-1989) »

International Conference

2-3 February 2017, Paris
Université Paris-Est Créteil, CRHEC

Warsaw, 1985: The Polish People's Republic's Secret Police initiated Operation Hyacinth (*Akcja "Hiacynt"*), a political action designed to inventory all the names of homosexuals — and of their relatives — in Poland. During a two year period, a list of 11.000 people was compiled. Under the guise of a medical/public health rationale, within the context of policing the proliferation of HIV/AIDS, this initiative resulted in increased state surveillance of sexual minorities. In reaction, it encouraged sexual communities to organise and push for greater sexual emancipation — both rejecting their blackmail and defining a legitimate role within a changing Polish civil society. This action was only one example of a broader spectrum of sexual politics that composes a recent history of homosexuality in the former communist states. Our symposium seeks to write and interrogate this history and its contemporary lineages, which encompass the U.S.S.R, the "People's Democracies" (G.D.R., Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria) and Yugoslavia, from the end of the Second World War until the fall of Communism.

This writing of a history of Central-Eastern European homosexualities since 1945 will involve drawing out and examining both communist themes and disparate national trajectories: juridical, political, social, cultural and artistic. There is clear evidence of national differences in these histories: same-sex relations are, for example, decriminalized in Hungary in 1961, whereas legalization of such relations happened long after the fall of communism in Romania, in 1996. These considerations reflect broader differences in political background — Ceaușescu's Romania being very different than Kádár's and subsequent Governments in Hungary.

These political histories will have to take into account how sexual policy and politics are shaped throughout the communist period by the requirement of keeping alive a so-called "socialist order". Whether in different regimes or through different dissenting texts such as Maxim Gorky on "disorderly sexual life" (1934), homosexuality had been seen as inconsistent with this order much of the time. This incompatibility didn't exist during first years of Soviet history, and through early Soviet policy and the works of such as Alexandra Kollontai, though it became progressively denied throughout most of the communist period. An extended political history is still to be written by taking into consideration everyday life for homosexuals under communism, alongside different forms of policy, where criminalizing over-visibility (and its ostracism) usually collapsed into a multiple theatre, combining shadows of desire to lights of inclusion. Within this history of compatibility and incompatibility, homosexuals were not only victims, but also actors of socialist order.

Social and cultural dimensions to life under communism can be added to the political history, by following the traces of lesbian and gay community, by exploring their meeting spots (bars, half-private circles, cruising areas), by studying homosexual organisations that emerge in the 1980s. This encourages the examination of strategies of *mise en présence* of homosexual body in the social space.

The conference will be largely focused on artistic fields. In novels, films and their imagery, homosexuality arises here and there within regimes where censorship on what could be seen or spoken of never actually ceased (yet, with several nuances depending on the context). How could an image of a homosexualized body be produced? How could homosexuality transpire in the words of fiction? How can we analyse the recent theory proposed by Wojciech Śmieja wherein no “homosexual literature” exists in spite of several references to the subject in Polish novels? And what did artistic productions during this period represent among the homosexual community? One of the goals of the conference is to understand the complex relationship — induced by the finding of a homosexual possibility — that connects Socialist states, individuals and artistic productions.

Shedding light on this multilayered history involves questioning today’s accessible sources, as rich as delicate to manipulate, such as monitoring reports, historical memory processes elaborated since 1989, and the unending body of artworks. Though the issue of archives is particularly sensitive, not only because their sources concern a minority composed arbitrarily, but because this minority defines itself by matters rarely enunciated: desire, love, intimacy. We consequently wish to open a space of research that deals with a *mise en forme* of a discourse, hardly stated by homosexuals themselves, often born in a limbo of legal detours and social negotiations.

Besides, we think it is necessary to question the biopolitical dimensions of Eastern European homosexualities. To write their social history and to consider their artistic translations are two processes that can be completed through a philosophical approach. It is possible, if not necessary, to mobilize philosophical theorizations from this period (in particular those of Michel Foucault) and also some more recent ones, in order to question the political dimension of homosexual intimacy. More precisely, we want to interrogate the polysemous concept of “body”, in other words, understanding: 1/ how the homosexual person was reached by laws in his or her physicality, 2/ to what extent the historicized frames (political, moral, religious) shaped and acknowledged the existence of homosexuality, but condemned it at the same time by creating a range of prohibitions and, above all, 3/ to what point homosexuals before 1989 could search for a truth about themselves and assert their desire in the public space. This philosophical dimension leads to many questions: Was there a “homosexual corporeity” that was specific to socialist Europe? If so, what were the models? In what extent can we observe a continuity between the affirmative search of a truth about oneself and the visualization of desire? And around the 1980s, in what way did AIDS shake up the imbalance between biopolitical management and the existing forms of homosexual intimacy having the treatment of the “problem” lurking in the background?

Finally, we would like to put the problem of the communist homosexuality in two broader perspectives. First, to consider it in the vast history of relationships between men and women in socialist times. Communist societies were deeply affected by gender definition, as many works have recently proved: the access of women to wage-earning labour, the way women were encouraged to conquer positions in different spheres of activities or the demand to educate persons outside the family sphere were different advances which moved gender frontiers (sometimes in unexpected shifts). To what extent was the homosexual experience affected by this? How can we use the communist experience to think more generally about the articulations between gender relationships and homosexuality? Contributions of scholars from the field of gender issues will be much

appreciated. We have the same kind of questioning about sexuality at the socialist time. Those regimes promoted, sometimes simultaneously, repressive prudishness, interest in a “healthy” sexuality (that was supposed to make people more satisfied, and therefore more obedient and more productive) and considerations about an undefined sexual blossoming. How did homosexuality confirm or challenge the approach of sexuality in these socialist contexts?

Secondly, communist homosexuality will be put in a larger geographical context. If scholars have been writing the history of European homosexualities for more than ten years, their focus rests mostly on the Western protagonists and ignore their Eastern European counterparts and their communist pasts. With this conference, we do not want to compare systematically what happened in the West and the East; neither we want to see Eastern Europe as the eternal poor imitator of its Western neighbour, nor to read its history of homosexuality as the expectation to catch up with the Western history — expectation that the fall of the Wall would finally make possible; such a perspective is irrelevant to understand what happened before 1989 (and also what has happened after 1989). Notwithstanding the above statements, exchanges with Western Europe, circulations and migrations (whether temporary or definitive) will be nonetheless inevitable topics.

We hope the discussions will open a general reflection about models, corporeity, languages, and about the social and political structures where homosexuals found a zone of repression and expression at the same time. In the present, when gay movements have obtained some rights and when new forms of homophobia appear in Eastern and Western Europe, viewing the history of contemporary homosexuality in another context than the one that is most often analysed (the liberal and bourgeois regimes) can be a way of challenging some certainties, of transforming a memory into a new history and to construct a critical history of differences at European scale.

Submission & Timeline :

Submissions for papers (500 words max.) written in English or French, along with a short biography (5 lines max.), should reach us by June 25, 2016 at the latest.

Acceptance/rejection will be notified on the 11th of July.

Please send abstracts to: eastqueerconference@gmail.com.

We encourage submissions from researchers in disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, and we will pay particular attention to proposals from doctoral students and young doctors.

Transportation and accommodation of participants may be taken in charge by the conference's budget, partly or totally, in the case financial conditions allow it.

Scientific board : Prof. Dr. Éric Fassin (Université Paris 8 Vincennes Saint-Denis, France), Prof. Dr. Dina Iordanova (St Andrews University, Scotland, U.K.), Dr. Hadley Z. Renkin (Central European University, Budapest, Hungary), Dr. Florence Tamagne (MCF, Université Lille 3, France), Prof. Dr. Judit Takács (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary)

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