

my trouble with queer

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One of the most striking moments at the Queer Zagreb conference was the juxtaposition of a paper by an American queer theorist with a participant's report from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The American expressed his discontent with a recent New York City ordinance, which prohibited sex in public spaces and closed down adult-sex shops near churches and schools. At the same time, he spoke in favour of sex being practised publicly, like a sports activity. Of course I didn't interpret his argument literally—as that of having sex on, say, a basketball court—still the idea of sex being practised as sport sounded very *queer* in the context of the Bosnian report (or of any report from former Yugoslavia). In contrast, the Bosnian representative described their abortive efforts to conduct research among gays and lesbians in Bosnia, in order to get some basic information about the 'hidden minority'. They set up an Internet site where gay men and women could anonymously contact each other. Within days the site became a lively virtual meeting point for mostly gay men and some lesbians. However, when they were contacted by the researchers and asked to fill in a short questionnaire, they generally didn't respond. Homosexuality here is shameful and is only possible when it is secret, hidden, anonymous. Gay Bosnians are struggling with the (US-based) concept of 'coming out'.

My problem with queer theory and activism is not the theory itself. Indeed queer theory's most important contribution is to disclose how the gay movement of the 1970s and 1980s only dealt with white gay male experience, thus centralising some identities and marginalising others. However my problem (or, to be more exact, my concern or maybe my own ignorance) is how to translate queer theory into the practice of everyday politics, especially in the postwar areas of the former Yugoslavia. Here national identity seems to be vulnerable and

images of threatened identity still persist (whether the threat be that of neighbouring nations or of social and/or ethnic minorities from within the nation-state). In these circumstances, activism à la Queer Nation, with its public mass kissing in malls, is unlikely to have any positive effect in the short term. In fact it would be almost impossible to get one hundred gay and lesbian couples in any of the former Yugoslav republics to publicly hold hands and kiss in front of a newly opened western-style shopping mall, many of which are springing all over the place. Such activism would definitely provoke physical violence, as the unfortunate attempt to organise a gay pride parade in Belgrade has clearly shown. This, of course, does not mean that one should remain, as Foucault would say, a docile body in the hands of homophobic society, which intends for homosexuality to be as invisible as possible, since the more invisible it is, the less threatened society feels. As yet, it seems that the (radical) US queer model does not translate well into those societies on the doorstep of the European Union (EU). Even so, as someone at the Queer Zagreb conference mentioned, New York and San Francisco are not the USA, which means that 'queering' in some other parts of the country would provoke similar hostile reactions, or, to put it differently, one can find Bosnia in many parts of the USA.

The million-dollar question, therefore, is how to translate the queer sensibility of identities into policy papers and government resolutions. The human rights model seems to be, at the moment, a much more effective strategy than adopting direct action, even though protecting 'normal' lesbians and gays (and, some would say, by doing so, normalising them) means leaving out bisexuals, transsexual and transgender people, to name only few. This is where the rectifiable power of queer theory should enter practice. In the meantime, a step-by-step policy (a policy of compromises) seems to be the only way—and this is the approach taken by both the Croatian and Slovenian lesbian and gay movements.

The Scandinavian human rights model (although mirroring the history of the US gay rights movement) seems to be much more applicable to the former Yugoslavia. This model is heavily employed by the European Union (EU) and implied in all of its resolutions. Now in the former Yugoslavia, the EU and its standards are replacing the communist ideal, and it seems that Slovenian politicians can't do enough to please their European colleagues. As Slovenia is set to become a full EU member on 1 May 2004, the time is ripe for the adoption of same-sex partnership law. The adoption of that kind of law (with all its imperfections) will provide political points for Slovenia in the EU and hopefully will lay the ground for the future legal equality of *queer* identities.

However, compromising can have peculiar results. In Croatia, the law on civil union between people of the same sex guarantees only two of twenty-seven rights usually ascribed to straight partnerships. The Croatian LGBT movement made a compromise and took what was gracefully offered. Similarly in Slovenia, LGBT organisations, together with the

Ministry of Family Affairs, agreed to implement the step-by-step approach and prepared a bill on registered same-sex partnerships that explicitly stated adoption was not allowed for gay people. On examining the bill, the government's juridical office rejected it, noting that prohibiting adoption for gay people would set new lines of inequality between the gay and straight populations and called on the writers of the bill to allow for adoption. The LGBT organisations, in apparent opposition to their own interests, declined the proposed change in the bill, claiming that allowing adoption would most definitely result in the Slovenian parliament rejecting the bill.

If the law is adopted, it will be the greatest legal success of the Slovenian gay and lesbian movement, which is the oldest gay and lesbian movement in Eastern Europe, celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year. The forthcoming parliamentary elections in November, however, might easily obstruct it. In rural areas, where fifty-five per cent of people would not want a homosexual to be their neighbour, supporting gay rights can lead to political suicide.

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