

Ideas for a workshop "Transnational perspectives on queer theory in the UK and Poland - challenging Anglo-American perspectives in queer theory"

Joanna Mizielińska

I am currently interested in two separate but interrelated problems. The first one I have provisionally called "the Americanisation of Queer theory". Here I am mostly interested in the reception of queer theory in different contexts (in this case Polish and British) and how/in which ways (if any) it influences LGBT politics. The second problem, which needs to be addressed, concerns the current LGBT identity politics with its foundational claim on homosexuality as natural and biological, connected with a strong normative demand of "coming out". This raises the question whether it is the best strategy to fight for equality, queer rights, and against homophobia. What is/could be a queer theorist's response to that? Is queer theory influential at all in this debate? I will discuss those two problems separately and I hope that they will become good starting points for a comparative discussion.

1. The Americanisation of Queer Theory

Here I am interested to study the ways in which sexuality studies are dominated by Anglo-American scholarship and how this cultural colonization works in the context of reception and development of queer theory in Poland/Europe. It is worth investigating why even in those countries where much more progressive legislation regarding the rights of sexual minorities (i.e. the same-sex partnership law) exists, so often the American model constitutes a universalizing pattern of how the LGBT/queer studies should grow and in which direction LGBT movements should progress (i.e. having its starting point in Stonewall[1]). My principal concern involves the question how concepts that are born in the U.S. are being imposed on other cultures and how, in the light of this hegemonic imposition, the field of queer studies throughout the world has been artificially constructed. Why is it still very often presumed that the Anglo-American model stands as an origin and a norm and that other cultures will follow its general pattern and teleological development?

I am interested in exploring the theoretical concerns and problems of the Americanisation of queer theory and its impact on the reception and growth of queer theory in non-American contexts. The origin of queer theory is deeply rooted in a quasi-ethnic model of politics

within the gay liberation movement in the U.S., of which there is no equivalent in Poland or some other European countries. This brings to the foreground a series of questions for queer theorists from Eastern and Central Europe:

1. How does this model foreclose full recognition of separate histories of LGBT movements and of sexuality studies in different countries? And how to pluralize discourses on sexualities in Europe and challenge the U.S. hegemony?
2. Should we follow it and go through the "necessary preliminaries" of creating a form of a similar gay social group identity in order to contest and deconstruct it afterwards?
3. In which direction is American queer theory going nowadays and how does it shape new directions in sexual studies of other cultures? Does it become, more and more, an exemplification of an American domination/imposition within sexuality studies, or does it become self-aware of specific localities and more inclusive?
4. Is queer theory "just" another form of imperialism/hegemonic imposition or is it a useful means of creating "global queerhood", a challenge to "paternalistic meddling" and the nation state, a chance to achieve, at the legal and the political level, global

protections and guarantees that cannot be achieved at the local level?

5. Who legitimizes the circulation of ideas and concepts? How is this hierarchical relation reflected in queer scholarship?

A comparison between the reception of queer theory in the UK and Poland, with respect to their different histories of LGBT movements, could allow us to analyse different models of adaptation of queer theory into local cultural contexts as well as divergent ways it functions. I would like to find out more about both differences and similarities in academic approaches to queer theory and their possible influence on LGBT political practice.

2. Queer theory vs LGBT practice: do we have anything to say?

Although many LGBT activists in Poland are familiar with queer theory, there is a strong tendency, visible in their political demands, that in practice they stick to the old identitarian arguments about homosexuality as a biological condition that one is born with. On this foundation they claim equal rights and tolerance. This brings back questions about usefulness of this approach, both in the short and long run. Also, it would be interesting to check why, even being familiar with the queer theory approach to identity politics, leading

"queer theory" courses in practice forget about the dubious character of the homosexual identity and build their politics as if it has never been questioned. (For instance, KPH/Campaign Against Homophobia does strongly promote at the same time "coming out" as the only effective political strategy in their magazine called *Replika* .)

In order to examine the attitude towards queer theory among Polish LGBT activists deeper, one has to take into account how queer theory has been adapted into the Polish context of LGBT organisations, which can be translated into question what "queer" in the Polish context really meant/means. Since the beginning of the 90s more and more LGBT organisations have been established, and some attempts to build a LGBT culture are more and more visible. At the same time, these very attempts are often hidden under the "queer" labelling that for most Poles does not connote the sexual character of these activities; thus betraying a preference for using "queer" as a safe, because generally misunderstood, word. However, one must also notice that the very unreadability of the word was used by Polish queer scholars on purpose - to introduce queer theory into the Polish academia. So we may ask whether to blame Polish queer theorists for failing (or not wanting strongly enough?) to find a Polish equivalent for the word "queer" which could also result in failing to translate queer ideas into Polish context (i.e. we in fact

"allow" for this mis/use)?

In fact, nowadays in Poland we deal with a mixture of ideas taken either/both from queer theory (or hidden under this term) or/and from traditional gay and lesbian studies (i.e. essentializing, fixing, and naturalising the category of "homosexuality" that queer theory questioned and historicized). The result of this is that very often the term "queer" becomes a synonym of "gay" both in the academia and practice. There are hardly any attempts to build the politics based on less essentializing approach to one's sexuality.

A good contemporary example of an existing misunderstanding of queer theory and practice is an article published recently in the KPH magazine *Replika* . On the one hand, it presents the opinion of Polish queer theorists (Basiuk, Kochanowski) explaining queer theory approach very well. On the other, it sums up fears and doubts of anonymous (?) people, presumably editors. Some of them concern the problem of queer (theory) that allows people to stay in the closet, to hide one's sexual identity. And this stands in opposition to the "coming out" politics that the magazine strongly promotes, if not imposes. As one of those anonymous persons has stated, "Is answer about sexual orientation such as 'I don't like to define myself a queer one or the voice from the closet? How to differentiate between them? Is it a true impossibility of clear sexual

self-definition, or fear of homophobia and self-denial of one's homo- or bisexuality, that stands behind this unwillingness to define oneself? This is my problem with queer theory" (*Replika* # 17/2009). This shows a huge gap between the knowledge of what queer theory in fact is, and how it can(not) be applied to Polish practices, translated into certain political activities. Especially problematic for me is how in the above example queer theory that questions homo/hetero dichotomy and fights with homophobia (i.e. has a strong political agenda that criticizes all kinds of discrimination based on sex, sexuality, and gender) has been equalized with the position of being in the closet.

At the same time *Replika* very often uses the word "queer" but as a synonym of gays and lesbians. And KPH that publishes it has recently organised the first Polish queer studies courses where part of the syllabi consists of courses on gay and lesbian identity politics but some are really devoted to queer theory. So how can we explain this split attitude if not schizophrenia? Why most of the activists think that "coming out" and identity politics built around the naturalised concept of one's sexual identity (biological/given) is a more accurate and successful political strategy? Why "in-your-face politics" and non-identity approach that queer theory offers turned out to be less appealing to Polish LGBT activists than the identity approach that preceded it? Also, is this tactic really successful?

Maybe in the long run it can even be dangerous? And what can be done to include more critical and queer voices into the current Polish LGBT practice?

I ask these question because they seem urgent. While working on this short paper I read an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* by Janusz Majcherek called "Naturally, culturally" (29.05.2009). The context in which it has been published is quite interesting. It has been just after the controversy with Paul Cameron's visit to the Wyszynski University and the conference organised there about homosexuality (more correctly, about curing it). Majcherek, however, refers to this event only briefly. He wants to broaden the discussion and deliberate on natural/inborn vs cultural/acquired background of homosexuality. He writes that the whole discussion is not scientific but ideological. To support his argument he refers to scientific publications from the past that all included homosexuality as a perversion/sickness. Nowadays it has changed, according to him, not because science gives us a better understanding of the issue but because of the influence of non-scientific elements. He also refers to Fukuyama who noticed that nowadays the Left claims that homosexuality is an inborn and permanent condition and therefore homosexuals should be left in peace, but the inclination towards a crime is an effect of social and cultural environments, therefore criminals could be re-socialised. The Right thinks the

opposite. This dilemma between naturalisation of homosexuality within the leftist thinking and the cultural explanation of homosexuality that the Right claims is something that he is interested in exploring[2]: "The Left claims therefore that something that is in accordance with nature is good, and the Right that something that is in accordance with the traditional culture is good" (Majcherek 2009, 29). Then, however, he states that the "naturalistic argumentation", as he called it, "is not at all persuasive and decisive. Even if we agree that certain behaviour, attitudes or inclinations are the result of natural causes, it does not mean that we have to accept them. A well known etiologist, Konrad Lorenz, proved that interspecies aggression is inherently rooted in biology (i.e. such behaviour is natural). But does it mean that we have to affirm it among human beings, therefore within human relations?". Then he gives examples of polygamy and the first menstruation as a natural sign of readiness to procreation that culture refuses to accept. Therefore, he claims the primacy of culture over nature. In his opinion, the whole debate between the Catholic Church and the conservative ideologists claiming that homosexuality is "unnatural" and the Left that claims that it is natural is false. According to him, "the dispute concerns not only what is natural but also which of the potential natural tendencies we should / should not approve. However, the problem is not how the things are but how they should be [...] Therefore, it is not fair to turn to science in search for

arguments, no matter which side of the ideological dispute will do it." He did not write "how the things should be" but, taking into account his statement about the primacy of culture, we can make a guess.

I have referred to this article because, in my opinion, it shows the dead end of LGBT identity politics based on nature and biology and the concept of sexual identity as fixed, given, everlasting. Thus, it will be crucial nowadays to examine (and give a chance to?) queer strategies to deal with homophobia and check how they could be incorporated into the daily practice of Polish LGBT politics. What can we learn from the English experience? How to build a successful sexual politics and fight back homophobia without naturalising the sexual identity? What language to use? What is the best approach if we take into account the local context (Polish and British)? Which model of activism, essentialist or constructivist, to choose?

[1] A good example of this tendency is a new project by LAMBDA called Stonewall Fund.

[2] Also the shift in arguments because until recently it was the Right that claimed the primacy of nature and the natural law.

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