

## Re-defining the question

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Writing for an LGBT website [homiki.pl](http://homiki.pl), the philosopher Tomek Kitliński and the art historian and curator Paweł Leszkowicz scrutinize the past twenty years of LGBT activism in Poland, reversing the usual narrative of progress[1]. They revisit some political campaigns and artistic projects that focused on gender and on queer sexuality, such as the 2003 poster campaign "Let them see us," which featured photos by Karolina Breguła of same-sex couples holding hands, Tomek and Paweł among them. Writing today, they dismiss the enhanced visibility of LGBT issues because it has not led to institutional change. Mirroring in this respect the failure of the women's movement in Poland to reverse the 1993 ban on abortion, the LGBT movement has failed to implement registered unions or other similar measures. Hence, the representations of gender and sexual difference by Polish activists and artists must be read as dramatizing sexist and heteronormative oppression, as well as the movement's failure, rather than as a mark of progress.

This pessimistic re-visioning is motivated by a desire to shake up

readers' political consciousness and make them more active. Leszkowicz and Kitliński are staging a queer jeremiad in the hope that, once named and recognized, the crisis will resolve itself in a major overhaul of LGBT activism and boost its political efficacy. They conclude that Poland ought to look to countries that are more civilized and that harbor a more advanced notion of citizenship; in the authors' own description, the project involves linking cosmopolitan aspirations to grassroots work in order to implement utopia as concrete legal and social change. The explicit models for this implementable utopia are some of Poland's neighbors and other EU member states that have already instituted the changes that are being called for.

The context of the EU and some neighboring countries—the Czech Republic's introduction of registered unions is seen as an especially clear sign of Poland's backwardness—is of course not to be disregarded, even if direct influence of the European institutions on the Polish legal system in the area of LGBT rights is yet to come. The one exception is the EU-enforced non-discrimination clause in the Polish labor code which explicitly mentions sexual orientation. But the clause remains latent because detailed regulations have not been adopted, public prosecutors are unlikely to press charges, and the courts remain unwilling to recognize claims. The American political scholar Conor O'Dwyer shows that, in the eyes of Polish

LGBT activists, any changes in social perception of queers that have occurred are due to local endeavors rather than the EU's intervention or direct influence. The queer activists' opinion is not merely self-congratulatory; they have been doing the on-the-ground work, setting their sights on what Kitliński and Leszkowicz term cosmopolitan inspirations, without losing sight of the local socio-political conditions.

The question, then, is not so much about whether these activists are sufficiently motivated, or if they keep as busy as they should. It is rather about how to identify the points of resistance to social and political change. It seems to me that a crucial aspect is the identity construction of Polish nationalism, functioning in close affinity with a parochial strain of Catholicism, in that both result in forms of xenophobia-anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, and homophobia-by projecting an image of togetherness ( *naszość* ) that exudes difference. This identity construction, which harks back to Polish Romanticism and the century-long struggle for independence, remained a hallmark of Polish "specificity" (or a kind of Third Way) also during the Real Socialist era when, in the post-Holocaust years, Poland was frequently imaged as ethnically homogeneous. Perhaps the most important impact that EU accession has had on the sense of Polish national identity is exposure to other cultures and societies afforded by the opening up of national borders, the

availability of international education, and the opportunities to work abroad. With hundreds of thousands of Poles living abroad, and with immigrants' settling in some Polish cities, many Poles are confronted with ethnic and national differences in their daily lives and in media representations. The lesson from this intercultural exposure is one which recalls Poland's past as a multi-ethnic state: that citizenship and ethnicity are not to be conflated, and that there is more than one way to live in a country one calls home. From a Polish perspective, today's Europe is closer to the Renaissance than to the nineteenth century; we wonder whether to write in Polish or in English (as sixteenth century poets chose between Polish and Latin), but we are not concerned with national independence.

In this context, it is interesting to re-visit Michał Witkowski's best-selling novel *Lubiewo* (2005), which marked a new level of homosexuality's visibility in Poland. The novel was more widely read and commented upon than several other gay novels published at the same time. *Lubiewo* 's popularity was due to its exotic male homosexual protagonists. Their tall tales about their past sexual exploits are obviously intended *a epater le bourgeois* , whose stand-in is the novel's authorial narrator, precariously poised between the diverse subject positions the novel presents. At the other extreme from the aging queers are the young and politically savvy gay activists, who attempt to instruct the narrator about the

kind of book he should be writing: a tear-jerker about how gays are just like everyone else. That, of course, is not the novel *Lubiewo*.

*Lubiewo* has been appropriated by the LGBT movement in a curiously non-radical way. Because the aging queers' sexual exploits mostly took place in the Real Socialist era (with Soviet soldiers the preferred sexual object), it was easy for the general reading public to imagine that practices such as cruising belong safely in the past, having been replaced with more savory institutions, like the Internet. The LGBT community has adopted this view and then superimposed a narrative of gay liberation onto the logic of post-1989 political and economic transformation; it has arguably done so also in some of its political and artistic projects, including the 2003 poster campaign in which all the same-sex couples photographed while holding hands present as young, professional urbanites. The protagonists' nostalgia for their by-gone youth is misread as nostalgia for the "Communist" past with its allegedly different, and possibly more exciting, sexual protocols. Yet, these temporal divides are misconceived. As a matter of simple fact, cruising in public parks has not stopped. The world of *Lubiewo* is very much present, as the authorial narrator's attraction to it indicates.

Neither is it acceptable, as the Polish left has done, to read the novel

as critique of the post-1989 transformation focusing on those who have not profited from it: the elderly pensioners being one common example. Certainly, this ubiquitous critique does find some reflection in the novel, whose aging queers live in somewhat embarrassing conditions. But Witkowski contradicts the stereotypical equation of happiness with material well-being. The point is rather that his characters' self-enjoyment does not depend on economic success. The novel is critical of the link between the modern gay and the modern bourgeois, and of the usurpation of the LGBT space by this equation, which the Polish movement seems to have adopted in imitation of the Western world, especially the U.S., along with the hegemonic positioning of coming out and a broader narrative of modernity. Whatever of value may have been found in the queer world-space prior to the caesura of emancipation is obscured from view. However, neither the economic nor the political change concerns everyone. The novel portrays the utterly different lifestyles of the modern gays and the aging queers, who co-exist and cross paths without very much cross-pollination in the form of exchange of ideas or shared life experience. It renders class divisions visible, but it does not do so from the perspective of a left whose goal is the elimination of these divisions.

The parallelism of lives and lifestyles is a metaphoric embodiment of the idea of multiple narratives, and of a multicultural and

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poly-national ideal, which Witkowski is putting forth and which is the true object of his nostalgia. This is further confirmed by the baroque stylization of his subsequent novel *Barbara Radziwiłłówna z Jaworzna-Szczakowej* (2007), which gestures toward Poland's pre-Romantic and multi-ethnic tradition, and whose characters are of different ethnic backgrounds, speaking different languages. Clearly, this is the reverse of the Ost-nostalgia of which Witkowski has been accused. In an ironic twist that his novel cleverly foresees, the left and LGBT readers' focus on nostalgia becomes a symptom of their own nostalgia for something like a party line.

This is a disheartening conclusion about the misreading of a novel. And, in light of Witkowski's literary embodiment of a poly-national ideal, Leszkowicz and Kitliński's critique of the LGBT movement may not be radical enough. Though these writers call for more advanced notions of citizenship, which implies an alignment with Witkowski's ideal, their solution seems to be greater intensity of progress rather than a rethinking of its very path. The question may be whether a queer politics is possible without questioning the false homogeneity of Polish culture.

[1] Tomek Kitliński and Paweł Leszkowicz, with illustrations by Mariusz Tarkawian, *ŹKłęska postępowej polityki gender i queer w Polsce?* [www.homiki.pl/...](http://www.homiki.pl/)