



Innovation Despite Backsliding—the Importance of the Events of 7th August 2020 for Polish LGBTQIA Youth

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Abstract

In this paper, I analysed the events of 7th August 2020 in Warsaw, when 48 people were detained by the Polish police who brutally raided solidarity demonstration with non-binary activist Margot Szutowicz. The aim of the paper is to explore queer activism in Poland on microsociological level using Gabriel Tarde imitation theory. I tried to show how individual experience of resistance gave rise to new, innovative forms of activism which became a social phenomenon. In my research, I used in-depth interviews with some of detainees and over 180 diaries/memoirs of Polish LGBTQIA people.

Keywords LGBTQIA · Poland · Homophobia · Queer anarchism · Central and Eastern Europe · Law of imitation theory

As Gabriel Tarde said, what one needs to know is which peasants, in which areas of the south of France, stopped greeting the local landowners. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987:271).

Introduction

Poland has been one of the most homophobic countries in the entire European Union for many years. The situation in the country has deteriorated rapidly in recent years and it is now considered the worst country in EU for the LGBTQIA community as the research shows (ILGA-Europe, 2022). The legal situation, for one, is getting dramatically worse—as recent studies indicate (Grabowska-Moroz & Wójcik, 2022; Korolczuk, 2020) Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

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In their homophobic and transphobic policies, Polish authorities mobilise discourses which are not exclusive for Poland and often become imported from the USA, such as religious discourse (and institutional support of Catholic Church) (Mello, 2015); the narrative of child protection (Fejes, 2008); anti-transgender narrative (Binnie, 2014) or even associations of homosexuality with Nazism (Stein, 2002). The difference, however, is that these discourses are, in the Polish case, mobilised by the highest governmental officials, including the President of the state.

This paper offers unique empirical data and provides an insight into Polish queer activists' experience and the spread of innovation as regards the forms of resistance within the LGBTQIA community. The use of in-depth interviews and LGBTQIA memoirs will hopefully enrich the perspective on protest and resistance (Peterson et al., 2018), radical queer strategies (Goh, 2017; Cohen, 1997) as well as on psychological aspects of activism (Furman et al., 2018).

Although works describing the experiences of sexual minority groups in non-western countries appear more and more often, e.g. LGBTQIA advocacy in an authoritarian context in Egypt (Magued, 2021), Turkey (Göktaş, 2015), Russia (Buyantueva, 2020) and Belarus (Frear, 2021); queer politics and activists strategy in India (Kumar, 2017); struggle for LGBTQIA rights in Serbia (Gould & Moe, 2015) or post-Maidan and before-war Ukraine (Sanchez, 2016), the need for different approaches and analyses is urgent and the new angle can help us to see and understand more about the struggle of non-heteronormative people in Poland.

The social movements in Central Eastern Europe have become lately the subject of many studies which situated the gender policies in the context of economic depression (Kantola et al., 2017), the crisis of democracy in backsliding states (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018), or stressed the emergence of innovative forms of resistance in the context of climate catastrophe (Gontarska et al., 2022). In the case of Poland, particular attention was given to the women's movement against restrictive abortion laws (Polynczuk-Alenius, 2022). Still, it seems that a microsociological approach can considerably enrich our knowledge of new forms of resistance, which became clearly visible within the LGBTQIA community in the summer of 2020. Aside from various researchers' work on the condition of social movements in Central Eastern Europe, there is a general lack of research in the field of movement strategies from the perspective of microsociology.

On August 7, 2020, a demonstration in solidarity with LGBTQIA activist Margot Szutowicz took place in Warsaw. This demonstration was brutally broken up by the police, with 48 people being detained and subjected to inhumane treatment at police stations. The aim of this article is to explore queer activism in Poland on the microsociological level and to provide new insights into Polish LGBTQIA activism. I will attempt to show how individual experiences of oppression become a social phenomenon and creates new, innovative forms of activism. I will try to show how subjective experience becomes an intersubjective one shared by a larger part of LGBTQIA community.

In the first part of the article, I describe the cultural and political context in which these events took place: I recall the most important events concerning the LGBTQIA

community in Poland in the last decades, because the events of 7th August 2020 were a consequence of the anti-equality policies of successive Polish governments. I present the stages of the formation of a homo- and transphobic political mainstream and the resulting disillusionment with the post-1989 strategies of emancipation pursued by LGBTQIA NGOs.

In the second part of the article, I discuss methods and theoretical framework. I reconstruct the events of August 7th from two perspectives: the perspective of those directly affected by police violence and the intersubjective perspective of members of the LGBTQIA community who observed the events without taking part in them directly. The article draws on material gathered during three research projects conducted and co-led by the author: the results of questionnaires on the attitudes of LGBTQIA people towards NGOs working on their behalf, interviews with people detained on the 7th of August, and memoir sources which allow us to assess the significance of the events for indirect participants. The chosen approach of microsociology, as well as methods used, can shed new light on the activism of marginalised groups in Central and Eastern Europe. As a theoretical framework, I am using Gabriel Tarde's theory of the laws of imitation. Tarde saw imitation as part of a *universal law of repetition* and social processes as dominated by imitation mechanisms. Social changes are possible thanks to innovations introduced by innovative units which are imitated by other individuals, leading to a new wave of imitation (Tarde, 1903).

In the third part, I demonstrate the results of this research: (1) the low level of identification of LGBTQIA youth with the NGOs representing them; (2) the innovative (in the sense given to the term by Gabriel Tarde) nature of the actions of the collective Stop Bzdurom (Stop the Bullshit); (3) the significance of the events of August 7th. In this context, I outline two tendencies in the statements of young LGBTQIA people: on the one hand, a deepening of depressive moods and feelings of anxiety, and on the other, a radicalisation. The new forms of political activism present in the Stop Bzdurom collective co-founded by Margot Szutowicz are assessed.

In this article, I propose to critically examine the events of August 7, 2020 taking into account not only the Western perspective in which the emancipation of post socialist countries takes place in a linear manner and refers to American and Western Europe patterns of gender and sexual politics, but also a non-linear perspective, reflective of many different contributions, such as the one by the Stop Bzdurom collective and imbued with local specificity and Polish history (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011). From this perspective, we cannot describe this event as a "Polish Stonewall" without the risk of missing its local characteristics, but we can see a different, unique path that the Polish LGBTQIA community has been creating.

Calendar: Development of Homophobic Policies Between 1989 and 2021

There are approximately two million non-heterosexual people in Poland (Mizielińska et al., 2015). Seventy percent of LGBTQIA youth in Poland report having suicidal thoughts and 50% of them suffer from depression (Winiewski & Świder, 2021).

LGBTQIA people remain invisible to the legal system in Poland: they do not have the right to information about their partner's health, to decide on treatment, to receive the remains, to bury their partner or to any inheritance. Poland is one of the last EU countries where it is not possible to formalise same-sex relationships. Surprisingly, the position of Poland as a homophobic country is not grounded in Polish law and culture:

In fact, homosexuality has never been considered a crime within the Polish legal system. It was the sodomy laws of Russia, Prussia and Austria which criminalized homosexuality in Polish territories, after the country lost its independence in 1795. These laws lost their real power when Poland regained its independence after the First World War. In a Criminal Code, dated 1932, Poland officially decriminalized homosexuality, the first country in twentieth-century Europe to do so. Unfortunately, this act was more a reflection on the contemporary Western European debate on the decriminalization of sexual acts between men and the Polish reluctance to accept the legislation of occupying forces than the mark of a real social acceptance of gay men or lesbians in Poland before the Second World War (Szulc, *Queer in Poland: Under Construction*, 2011, p. 160)

The first criminal code penalised only same-sex prostitution, which was legalised eventually at the end of 1960s. During the period of communist rule, the authorities seemed to ignore homosexual minorities, but at the same time it should be remembered that the development of grassroots associations or social movements was strongly discouraged at the time. An essential event of this period was action “Hyacinth”—a large police and secret services operation conducted by means of surveillance and direct control of the gay men in the late 1980s. The action, involving the surveillance of 11,000 people, has not been thoroughly examined and researched due to the lack of access to the documents—called pink documents—collected at that time (Majewska, 2018). On the one hand, the lack of criminalisation of homosexual acts, and on the other hand, the surveillance of the gay community had its consequences in the non-confrontational character of LGBTQIA activism in Poland. Apart from state policy, attention should be paid to the presence of another actor whose aim was to preserve the conservative image of Polish society—the Catholic Church.

After the political transformation that took place in Poland in 1989, there were strong hopes in Polish society for a symbolic “transition” from the East to the West. In addition to the widely expressed economic and political aspirations, the transformation hopes also concerned the emancipation of minority groups, including LGBTQIA people. This, however, was met with strong resistance from conservative Catholic elites. The Church, in the spirit of the neo-conservative revolution of the 1980s in the USA and the UK, shielded and legitimised the free-market economic transformation, while building a cultural hegemony: the first symbol of the strengthening of the Church in state institutions was the introduction of religion into public schools, which took place in the school year 1990/91 (Milerski & Zieliński, 2022). Despite the declaration that participation in religious classes was voluntary, the form introduced was and still is implicitly obligatory—religious instruction is treated as

a compulsory subject for all students, but there is a possibility of exemption from these classes, after the submission of a statement by the parents. The content taught in these classes is often openly homophobic. Polish children and young adults are still taught that reparative therapies, even female genital mutilation and electric shocks, are good cures for homosexuality. Catechists who present such theses can count on the public support of the members of the current right-wing Polish government (Świerczek, 2021).

The topic of LGBTQIA people did not appear in the legislative space until 2003. After the first social campaign in Poland to counteract homophobia: “Let them see us” (Sypniewski & Warkocki, 2004), a group of 34 senators, on the initiative of senator Maria Szyszkowska, submitted the first bill on civil partnerships (Jawor & Zańko, 2015). The bill was passed by the Senate in December 2004. Before the bill was voted on, the Vatican got involved, publishing a document obliging Catholic parliamentarians to vote against it (Ratzinger & Amato, 2003). The decision to decline was probably influenced by the informal agreement between the Social Democratic government and the Church, concluded before the referendum on accession to the European Union in 2003. The Church supported Poland’s entry into the UE in exchange for guarantees that legal discrimination against LGBTQIA people would be maintained (Staszewski, 2017).

With the rise to power of the Civic Platform party in 2007, under the leadership of Donald Tusk, LGBTQIA communities were once again hopeful that the new government would implement anti-discrimination measures and pass a law on civil partnerships. The arrival of Europe’s first transgender member of parliament, Anna Grodzka, in 2011, as well as Poland’s first openly gay politician, Robert Biedroń, was cause for optimism. In the following years, however, there were no changes in the legislation concerning same-sex couples. Despite these efforts, successive drafts of acts on civil unions, submitted by different political circles in the years 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, were rejected or not processed at all.

The 2015 election was won by the Law and Justice party, and attacks on the LGBTQIA community increased once again. In 2017, Health Minister Konstanty Radziwiłł declared that “there will be no sex education in schools” (Ambroziak, 2017). This statement was linked to the voices of Catholic circles about the “sexualisation of children” by sex educators. In this way, the issue of “protecting” children from “depravity” was included in the homophobic discourse, while reliable, prejudice-free knowledge about human sexuality—also non-heteronormative—was considered “depravity”. The following years brought increased activity from conservative Catholic organisations whose actions targeted the LGBTQIA community. In the spring of 2019, local authorities urged by the ultra-Catholic organisation *Ordo Iuris*, as well as the Pro-Life Foundation, began to adopt anti-LGBTQIA resolutions. Both of these organisations initiated and carried out anti-equality and anti-women actions, fighting for, among others, the revocation of the right to gender reconciliation. Resolutions proclaiming freedom from the “LGBT ideology” (a new emanation of “gender ideology”)—so-called Local Government Charter of the Rights of the Family, which stigmatise and exclude LGBTQIA people and their families—have been introduced in response to Warsaw’s President Rafał Trzaskowski’s signing of the Warsaw LGBTQIA Declaration, which included a promise to implement anti-discrimination measures by the city and to include WHO standards in sex education

programmes in Warsaw schools (Mayor of the Capital City of Warsaw 2019). While initiated by conservative and Catholic groups, the resolutions of other local authorities (Charter of the Rights of the Family) were formally intended to “defend the family” against “LGBT ideology” and their true meaning was revealed by the conservative magazine “Gazeta Polska”, which attached an “LGBT-free zone” sticker to the paper edition. By 2020, the number of local authorities that had adopted homophobic provisions had reached 94, covering one third of Poland’s territory (Płoszka, 2022). The phrase “LGBT-free zones” was an open reference to the Judenfrei (Jewish-free) zones introduced during the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II.

In the spring of 2019, the Pro-Right to Life Foundation also intensified its activities. There was at least a temporal correlation here with the premiere of the documentary film exposing the impunity of pedophile priests (Sekielscy, 2019). The Church received a wave of criticism for covering up sexual crimes against children, and the Church hierarchy and Catholic circles responded with a campaign targeting non-heterosexual people, identified as a “real threat” to Polish children. The “Stop pedophilia” campaign was a set of actions carried out by the above mentioned Pro-Life Foundation, aiming at the introduction of a law, modelled on the Russian law, prohibiting the “promotion of homosexuality”, as well as glueing pedophilia and homosexuality together in the social consciousness (63% of Poles declare in surveys that they do not personally know any homosexual (CBOS, 2019b, a)). These actions include, for example financing vans with homophobic banners which travel around many cities and play lying slogans linking homosexuality to pedophilia from loudspeakers. The 2019 campaign against LGBTQIA people culminated in an attack by the right-wing militias on the Equality March in Białystok, a city in eastern Poland, and an attempted pogrom took place (John & Darwish, 2019). That same year, in Lublin, another city in eastern Poland, opponents of the Equality March there tried to detonate an explosive device (Gregory, 2019).

Andrzej Duda won in the presidential election on July 13 using anti-LGBTQIA tactics beforehand (Barczyszyn-Madziarz & Norström, 2022). The anti-LGBT policies pursued by successive governments have had obvious consequences for the wellbeing of LGBTQIA people (Yatsyk, 2020). According to a report by the CBOS (Centre for Social Opinion Research), sexual orientation is mentioned as the most common target of hate speech—it is indicated as such by 64% of respondents. Politicians are the second most frequently mentioned group when it comes to the use of hate speech—right after the Internet users and indicated as such by 47% of the respondents (CBOS, Hate speech Research Communication, 2019b).

Sexual politics in Poland is treated as a tool in the hands of politicians of all parties. On the one hand, the ineffectiveness of previous equality policies initiated by “left-wing” governments is visible, and, on the other hand,—so is the aggravation of anti-equality discourse by the current right-wing government (Kulpa & Mizieleńska, 2011). Although progressive circles did give hope for legal changes inspired by the European Union, LGBTQIA rights are no longer so central to the European project. Even though the idea of shared values regarding human rights is still alive through the EU and some can still name Europe a rainbow place, this project also generates different forms of exclusion (Ayoub & Paternotte, 2019; Cornejo-Valle & Ramme, 2022)

The trends of de-democratisation and opposition to equality emerging in Europe and the USA have been analysed by Krizsan and Roggeband. Polish democracy is described as unstable and subject to trends of backsliding:

Backsliding needs to be understood to mean more than just the removal or dismantling of policies, to include subtle and gradual reframing, or the undermining of implementation capacities such as institutions, planning or budgets. For backsliding to occur it is not necessary that all dimensions are present simultaneously. Backsliding may be present in only one dimension, and not in others. (...) Backsliding appears to affect implementation and institutional arrangements that support policies, and consultation mechanisms involving women's rights advocates. (Krizsan & Roggeband, 2018, p. 97)

The authors propose a conceptual framework that addresses two main spheres: the regression of equality policies and feminist responses. These trends are common to four CEE countries: Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. By following the facts, we cannot conclude that the LGBTQIA situation in Poland has improved, and that the positive equality trend has ever been strong, which is different from the thesis claiming that there was any positive trend (O'Dwyer, 2019). Conversely, the rights of transgender people, women's rights and access to IVF have been restricted in Poland in the last 20 years (Konopka et al., 2020).

Sources

In 2019, at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw, a Research Lab on LGBT+ History and Identities was established, of which I am a member. The Research Lab focuses on the folk history of LGBTQIA people, that is the study of everyday life, social relations and the strategies produced by these people to survive in an oppressive reality. In June 2020, in cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Warsaw, the Lab announced a competition for LGBTQIA memoirs (Pracownia Badań nad Historią i Tożsamościami Osób LGBT+ w ISNS UW, 2021). One hundred eighty-four memoirs were submitted. Forty memoirs were written by 15–20 year olds, more than 50 by 21–25 year olds and more than 30 by 26–30 year olds. Only a few texts were submitted by people over 40 years old. I analysed each one of them, almost two thousands pages of personal biographies, looking for those in which the authors mention the figure of Margot (non-binary activist of Stop Bzdurom collective) directly. What is important is that the contest ended on October 15th, 2020, so the time of the writing of these memoirs unexpectedly coincided with the period of an intensified campaign against the non-heteronormative community in Poland and the events of August 7th. The majority of the memoirs remain concerned with the public attitudes towards LGBTQIA people and the political campaign against them, and, in 21 pieces, the authors refer directly to the events of August 7th, 2020, recalling the arrested activist, Margot. Out of these 21 fragments, two have been separated for the purposes of this article, due to the authors' direct participation in the events of August 7th, and their content has been used in the section describing the police arrests. On the other hand, 19 diary excerpts are

used to analyse the meaning of the events for those members of the LGBTQIA community who were not directly involved in the events and who described their experiences from a distance (importantly, the diaries have been submitted from all over Poland; the perspective of Warsaw, the capital and the place of the events, is not privileged in them). It should be stressed that we are dealing with an exceptional situation in which individual authors, strangers to each other, undertake the description of the same specific events, incorporating them—independently of each other—into their personal biographies.

Another source is 6 IDI interviews with people (aged 18–24) who were detained by the police on August 7th and taken to police stations. The interviews are also connected with another project of the LGBTQIA History and Identities Research Centre—the publication of a book describing the course of events. I personally conducted four such interviews; two others were conducted by other researchers. The value of the collected material is, above all, its timing, as it was conducted within a year of the above mentioned events.

Finally, the article uses the results of a quantitative study I conducted in 2019 on the sense of representation of non-heteronormative people by LGBTQIA organisations. I presented these results at the 2019 national conference of the Polish Sociological Association. The survey involved 150 non-heteronormative people met in LGBTQIA clubs and bars in Warsaw. The vast majority of those surveyed—72%—were under the age of 24. This is a small study that I introduce in the article to illustrate the low involvement of LGBTQIA youth in the social movement/ protests, and the lack of knowledge about organisations responsible for the fight for the rights of sexual minorities.

The use of diaries as a source for social research has a long-standing tradition in Poland (Jakubczak, 1995). The diary method makes it possible to get to know the subjective side of reality; it provides insight into human motivations, aspirations and conscious needs and allows for the recognition of the links between the conditions of the social environment and the behaviour of the individuals (Szczepański, 1971). As far as the limitations of the diary study method are concerned, the greatest of them is the lack of representation, typical of all microsociological studies. The second limitation is the difficulty in establishing the reliability of the information obtained. Finally, the third limitation, related to the specific formula of eliciting and acquiring sources—a competition—is related to the possible perceptions of diary authors about the expectations of competition organisers despite the fact that in the competition announcement we wrote: “What matters is your story about your life, with its choices, joys, and difficulties, written in your voice. Regardless of whether it is written beautifully or simply. There are no unimportant situations or experiences—what counts is everything that is important to you—if it is important to you, it is worth writing down.”

Due to above mentioned limitations, the reconstruction of the events of August 7th used the method of triangulation, i.e. different data collection techniques were combined for an accurate, comprehensive description of a single object of study. The accounts of those detained on August 7th, 2020, were combined with the report of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture, operating under the Ombudsman (KMPT, 2020). On the other hand, when it comes to the analysis of

the diaristic resource, it is the subjective attribution of meaning to the event that is crucial. According to Znaniecki, the effect of a social phenomenon depends not only on its empirical content, but also on the subjective, individual point of view through which we learn the meaning it has for people at a given moment (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). In this article, I combine the constructive method (i.e. I build, on the basis of individual statements, a comprehensive picture of the situation, using the adopted conceptual apparatus) with the exemplification method, which allows to illustrate and justify the formulated theses. The method of exemplification is accompanied by content analysis: the selection of quotations was preceded by the definition of analytical categories and the evaluation of the frequency of occurrence and mutual relations between the contents.

Following Gabriel Tarde's thought, the social world should be examined from the perspective of actions and ideas which, he claimed, spread in society according to the laws he formulated in his works *The laws of imitation* (1890) and *L'Opposition universelle* (1897). Tarde saw imitation as part of a *universal law of repetition*, which is rarely interrupted by emerging innovations. From this point of view, most people are not innovative in their acts and beliefs, but they imitate each other:

Inventions diffuse by process of imitation, on which the social aspect of Tarde's system was entirely founded. Whereas inventions are rare (landmarks) in human conduct, most of the human action could be explained by (the flow of) imitation. People imitate beliefs and desires or motives that are transmitted from one individual to another. Beliefs and desires form the raw material in social interaction by which personalities evolve. Tarde insisted that focus on the analysis of social phenomena should be on micro-level, coming back to the individual. (Kinnuen, 1996, p. 433)

According to Tarde, there are three main laws of imitation: (a) the law of close contact—the closer people are to each other, the more imitations occur between them; (b) the law of imitation of superiors by inferiors—the imitation most often goes from top to bottom, people from lower social strata imitate those they perceive as having a higher social position; (c) the law of insertion—the old behaviours expire or grow stronger due to inclusion of new ones. Thorough elaboration and critique of Tarde's theory have been undertaken and its relevance is reaffirmed (Katz, 2006; Crane, 2000).

From the perspective of Gabriel Tarde's imitation theory, the activity of the Stop Bzdurom collective is a moment of social innovation. New patterns of behaviour, initiated by innovators, spread in waves, colliding with previously established patterns. The new pattern of behaviour is the result of social invention, behind which stands an individual who finds a new way of acting. The spread of the new pattern is a matter of imitation. Tarde describes human actions as “intrapyschic photographs” that transform the individual into the social:

Invention and imitation are, as we know, the elementary social acts. (...) The *thing*, which is invented, the *thing*, which is imitated, is always an idea or a volition, a judgement or a purpose, which embodies a certain amount of *belief* and *desire*. (Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, 1903, pp. 144-145)

Revolution, radical change, is thus a matter of these “things”, invented and imitated.

Innovation

In opposition to state-sponsored homophobia, grassroots movements characterised by greater, by Polish standards, radicalism have emerged. One such movement is the Stop Bzdurom collective, formed in 2019, which began its activities with dance protests against the actions of the Pro-Life Foundation. The collective refers to the idea of queer anarchism, questioning rigid binary gender categories and the heteronormative device of sexuality (Daring et al., 2012). Margot Szutowicz, one of the founders of the collective, became the first widely known non-binary person in Poland.

On June 27th, 2020, on Wilcza Street, in front of the Syrena squat, a Pro-Life Foundation van used in a campaign suggesting a link between homosexuality and paedophilia was stopped. The banners on the van were to be destroyed and Margot Szutowicz was accused of assaulting the driver of the vehicle. On the night of 28–29 July, members of the collective Stop Bzdurom, Gang Samzamęt and Poetka placed rainbow flags on Warsaw monuments, including those of Nicolaus Copernicus, the Warsaw Mermaid and Jesus Christ on Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw. The action of hanging rainbow flags was accompanied by a manifesto of the collectives (Samzamęt et al., 2020).

In the following days, rainbow flags appeared on dozens of monuments in several Polish cities, including Poznań, Kraków and Wrocław. They were hung by people not affiliated with the collectives that carried out the 28/29 July action.

Placing a rainbow flag on the Christ monument on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw provoked an outcry from right-wing circles and a reaction from the authorities, who considered the action of the collectives to be a crime under the existing provision in Polish law on offending religious feelings (Roszkiewicz, 2018). On the same day, July 29th, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki lit a candle in front of the monument, which he described as “desecrated by a rainbow flag” and compared the activists’ actions to those of the Nazis of the Third Reich during World War II (Bretan, 2020). In response, the following night activists moved the Prime Minister’s torch to the spot where a year earlier a transgender woman, Milo Mazurkiewicz, had died by suicide, to honour a victim of state transphobia. On August 6th, after winning the elections by half a million votes over the opposition candidate, and on the day of his swearing-in, flowers were laid by the President of the Republic of Poland Andrzej Duda and his wife in front of the monument of Christ in Krakowskie Przedmieście.

An important point on the symbolic map of Christian Poland, which was covered by the rainbow flags, was the cross on the peak of the Giewont mountain. The cross was erected there in 1901; Pope John Paul II, followed by conservative politicians and church hierarchs, regularly called for the “defence of the cross from Giewont to the Baltic Sea”. The rainbow flag appeared there on August 15th, but before the presidential election on July 12th, a campaign banner of Andrzej Duda hung there, which was not opposed by the conservative part of the society and the Church. In

the Polish public and media space, we can see, on the one hand, the alliance of the “throne” with the altar and the use of religious symbols in political fights, and on the other hand, the use of religious symbols is denied to environments and people with non-conservative worldviews. Significantly, Margot Szutowicz also pointed out that her actions were inspired by Christian anarchism, in which she incorporated the queer perspective.

The actions taken by the Stop Bzdurom collective were, on the level of language and forms of action, completely new for LGBTQIA activism in the Polish public sphere. What is important for my further reflections is not only the emergence of new forms of protest, but that these were taken up by numerous people throughout Poland who were not associated with the collective or the LGBTQIA movement.

Response to Visibility—Repression

On July 14th, Margot Szutowicz was detained for the first time by the police on suspicion of damaging a van promoting homophobic content (the accusation concerned damage to property worth 6000 zloty, i.e. 1200 euros). The arrest was brutal—Margot, although she did not resist, was thrown to the ground and then led out of her apartment without socks or shoes. The Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights intervened in the case due to the probable overstepping of powers by the police and the inhuman and degrading treatment of the activist. The next day, the District Court for Warsaw–Mokotów rejected the prosecutor’s motion for a 2-month sentence, but the prosecution, which is subordinate to the Minister of Justice, filed an appeal against the court’s decision. After the action of hanging rainbow flags on monuments, people connected with the Stop Bzdurom collective were arrested again. Szutowicz was arrested by uniformed police officers and taken away in an unmarked car in an unknown direction. The reason for the detention was “an offence against religious feelings”. After 2 days and the intervention of human rights organisations, the activists were released from custody.

On August 7th, 2020, the District Court in Warsaw, granting the appeal filed by the prosecutor’s office, decided to detain Margot Szutowicz for 2 months. Upon hearing the news of the court’s decision, a spontaneous solidarity protest in defence of the activist began. The activist wanted to voluntarily surrender to the police, but the police did not act. The demonstrators marched to Krakowskie Przedmieście, to the monument of Christ, which gained a special symbolic charge in connection with the hanging of a rainbow flag on it and was “protected” by riot police at that time. Margot was taken to an unmarked car. Protesters tried peacefully (using the sit-in method) to block the departure of the arrested activist; eventually the car drove away, and the police started a roundup in which 48 people were detained.

The actions of the Warsaw police on August 7th were criticised not only by the LGBTQIA community. The National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture, operating within the Office of the Ombudsman, prepared a report on the events following the detention of an activist from the Stop Bzdurom collective (KMPT, 2020). KMPT representatives talked to 33 out of 48 detainees. As a result of these interviews, analysis of the detention records and CCTV footage from the detainees’

rooms, a number of irregularities were found. Aggressive behaviour of some police officers was reported. One of those detained was beaten, and some of the detainees had visible injuries on their bodies. The excessive use of force against detainees, i.e. putting handcuffs on the back during transport, throwing them to the ground, etc., was systematic. The aggression on the part of the police was also of a verbal nature, with officers allegedly making vulgar, homophobic and transphobic comments.

Serious problems were also detected in relation to access to legal assistance for detainees—some did not know how to obtain such assistance; detainees were not informed at all about the possibility of receiving such assistance. The right to notify a third party about the detention was violated. Most people provided phone numbers to relatives without being informed whether they had been contacted. The obligation to provide chronically ill persons with immediate access to a medical examination was also not complied with. In most cases, access to a doctor was possible only a few hours after the arrest. The majority of detained persons were also not instructed in a comprehensible way about the possibility of filing a complaint against the actions of the police. Some attorneys could not determine the whereabouts of their clients because the police refused to provide them with that information. In the assessment of the National Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture, the treatment of detainees by the Police constituted degrading treatment, and in some cases the accumulation of ailments fulfilled the characteristics of inhuman treatment. The KMPT issued a total of 25 recommendations addressed to the Ministry of Interior and Administration, the Minister of Health, and the Commander of the Capital Police, which, together with a discussion of the factual and legal situation and international standards, are available in the report.

Results

There are nearly 30 NGOs actively operating in Poland, undertaking anti-discrimination work or providing emergency assistance to LGBTQIA people (LGBT + Congress Declaration, 2019). In 2019, I conducted a survey to find out whether LGBTQIA people felt represented by the organisations working on their behalf. Despite the small survey sample (150 people), we can see that even in a big city like Warsaw, where the survey was conducted, non-heteronormative people who participate in club life, and therefore at least minimally participate in the life of the LGBTQIA community, were not knowledgeable about particular organisations and the activities they undertake. The survey asked, among other things, about the following: (a) the need for organisations dealing with LGBTQIA issues in the broad sense (96% of respondents expressed the view that such organisations were needed); (b) knowledge of organisations dealing with LGBTQIA issues (27% of respondents mentioned only one organisation they knew, more than one organisation's name was mentioned by 39% of respondents, 34% did not know any LGBTQIA organisation); (c) knowledge of an event or action related to the LGBTQIA community (one such event was mentioned by 56% of respondents, more than one event was named by 24% of respondents, 18% of respondents did not know any event connected with organisations working for the rights of sexual minorities); (d) feeling of being represented in

society by any LGBTQIA organisation (70% of respondents did not name any organisation that would represent their voice in society, 17% of respondents named one organisation, and 13% of respondents named more than one organisation by which they felt represented). There are many reasons for this state of affairs, and it seems that they include two that are easy to identify when looking at the calendar reconstructed above—the lack of legislative power and ineffective responses to repressive policies and narratives towards LGBTQIA communities. At the same time, it must be stressed that the lack of a sense of representation and low awareness of the activities undertaken by organisations is not the result of indifference. The answers to the question about the need for an LGBTQIA organisation are telling. Characteristically, actions taken by a small anarchoqueer collective came to the fore during the height of the homophobic campaign in 2019–2020. The state apparatus responded to these actions with direct physical violence of an unprecedented scale. So how were they perceived by LGBTQIA people?

In order to answer these questions, I analysed diaries and found excerpts that refer to the events of August 7th. First, I traced the way the writers contextualise them, and then I analysed the meaning that the writers give to these events and to the figure of Margot by introducing August 7th into their personal biographies.

The contexts in which the authors of the memoirs place August 7th primarily concern the feeling of strong oppression which is the result of state homophobia: *Members of the government call my community an ideology (...) 1/3 of Poland has declared itself a zone free of LGBT “ideology” and this by means of legal resolutions. That is, a zone free of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. From me. Because, as I have already established, there is no such thing as LGBT ideology. People-free zones sound very much in the style of the 1940s. The insurgents and the Warsaw Rising oppose the current narrative. They don’t condone such resentment. It reminds them of something. Of the past* [F5]. The authors notice the instrumental use of homophobia by the authorities. An institution which has a particular impact on the lives of LGBTQIA young people, as an instrument of state homophobia, is also the school: *Instead of planning their careers, learning and growing in peace, they have to struggle for survival – often left to their own devices – to the youngest kids who already know or express it in other ways – they continue to be neglected by successive governments which fail to see our needs or even act to our detriment. Like the PiS government, which recently appointed the rainbow-phobe Czarnek as Minister of Education* [F20].

Taking into account the above timeline, it is not surprising that the institution of the Catholic Church is, for the writers, an extremely homophobic institution. In the opinion of the respondents, it not only spreads homophobic views, but is also their source. The media space, especially state-sponsored television, is also a sphere of influence of systemic homophobia. The consequence is an escalation of violence and hatred directed against the LGBTQIA community: *TVP commentator Jacek Wrona wished Margot “appreciation of her charms” by her fellow inmates. Is this the same way one prosecutes vandals who grease LGBT gallows on sidewalks (yes, such images do happen) or graffiti on gay homes that gets tagged? Are people prosecuted for online forums where personal information about gay people is made public “to beat the crap out of them”? How did the authorities deal with the bomb (!) brought to the Equality March in Lublin?* [F9].

Immersion in homophobic reality affects the well-being and psycho-physical state of non-heteronormative people: *Most of my friends are on antidepressants, beatings and insults are commonplace, TVP denigrates our community in a disgusting way every day, and the whole state apparatus is against us* [F2]. In the face of a growing sense of insecurity, emigration from Poland sometimes seems to be the only solution: *For years, I have been thinking about leaving the country, the scale of hatred grows every day, and sometimes I stop believing that the LGBTQIA community will ever be treated as fully fledged people in Poland* [F2]. Those who have already left are not free from anxiety: *I look at the current situation in Poland with anxiety and I am very happy that I left, but at the same time I worry about my friends. I know that activism gives strength, but I am a little afraid, although less so here. (...) In the last 2–3 years several people left, and the recent events have pushed others to leave* [F1]. Fear experienced throughout life—as we can see—becomes a part of the individual, it does not leave them even after emigration, it is the result of a kind of trauma, it is internalised, and it is also connected with concern for “those who stayed behind”. Emigration in this case is not, therefore, a complete cutting off from the problems of the community.

The point at which the energy emerging from the diaries changes is the appearance of the character of Margot. Characteristically, the very name of the collective (Stop the Bullshit) becomes a slogan for opposing homophobia. The authors of the memoirs are aware that Margot’s actions represent a new quality and note with satisfaction that she is not understood and not accepted by the liberal pseudo-allies who failed their hopes: *Margot, who exposed not only the obvious: low level of tolerance in general, but also the low tolerance of our allies. She proved indigestible to them* [F8].

When authors introduce the figure of Margot into their biographies, it is usually accompanied by two tendencies which, one after the other, form a trajectory revealing this new energy. The first is empathy—deepening of depression moods and feelings of anxiety - which becomes the catalyst for an awareness of pervasive repression. Margot is recognised as someone who finds herself in the same situation as the authors, exposes the violence of state homophobia and takes on the consequences of dissent. The second is the broadening of the horizon of concern and the radicalisation of views. This radicalisation occurs in a process that Gabriel Tarde has described as imitation—picking up on the innovative strategies used by the activist, internalising the forms of resistance used by her.

The first element—empathy—is evident in the following passages: *Why does no one see several million citizens? Why are we still inferior citizens? Why is our love crap? Why can't we show our feelings in public without fear? Why can't I put widower in the marital status box? It's all under the skin. Deep down. You ask me, what does this have to do with recent events, with Margot, with smashing the fucking homophobic vans? Everything* [F12]. *Margot's arrest left me devastated. I went there with my best friend, who happened to be visiting me, when we got the tip. The next day I did not get out of bed, I was not able to. I lost my sense of security, which had been undermined over the previous months by the growing institutional homophobia, which turned into real attacks* [F11]. People who watched what happened on August 7th in

the media experienced feelings that they described as shock, loss of security, crying, fear and helplessness. Not being present at the scene of the events is not a numbing circumstance: *Margot in custody. The Internet is bursting with pictures: people thrown onto pavements, onto poles, dragged to police cars, policemen in civilian clothes escalating the conflict. The most chilling photo: a girl's head on the ground is crushed by a policeman's foot, she is bleeding. (...) I'm not there, I can't be there, how can I be there. So, I watch the live broadcast, my heart beats as if I were there* [F7]. People who were physically far from the Christ monument in Krakowskie Przedmieście are mentally in the middle of the events.

The second element is that of inclusion/radicalisation. Margot and the other members of the Stop Bzdurom collective became heroes of the collective imagination, a previously absent character whose appearance makes it possible to oppose the hitherto strategy of patiently enduring oppression in the hope that the situation will improve: *I was tired of the narration of "turning the other cheek", so I was very enthusiastic about the girls direct actions – putting up stickers, spraying, painting over the tarpaulins of homophobic trucks. Margot and Łania made me feel that my anger at Poland was justified, that I could act in any way I wanted, and they would not judge – there was no better or worse way to equality – the important thing was to act in harmony with oneself. Stop Bzdurom has brought radical, anarchist practices into the mainstream, I greatly value their work and feel that their subversive actions will make a difference for LGBTQIA people* [F2]. The emergence of an uncompromising radical activist is the revelation of a new pattern of behaviour. This pattern seems to be anticipated by non-heteronormative people. Some get the impression that Margot becomes someone dear to them: *Margot motivated me to write down my own experiences. I look at a young person, brave and uncompromising and exactly what she wants to do – and I think "I've never been like that"* [F8]. The model of the new heroine became a driving force for action taken at various levels: *August 7th, 2020, Something broke inside me. Margot's arrest from Stop Bzdurom was the drop that poured the spell of bitterness. I am going to share it in a shortened version on social media – I can't be quiet anymore* [F9]. This radicalisation concerns not only LGBTQIA people, but also, as we can read, their relatives: *After the protests related to the arrest of Margot, she said that she, a middle-aged hetero woman, takes a rosary in one hand, a rainbow flag in the other, and goes with us to the barricades, because "everyone is a child of God and should be loved". After hearing this I was most simply proud* [F11]; and: *I hope that this becomes a Polish Stonewall. That this is the limit where people have run out of patience. Because how long can you let yourself be discriminated against and listen to this nonsense about yourself. What right do these lying trucks have to drive on Polish streets at all? I have the impression that their only aim is to make more people attack us, because if they say everywhere that we are pedophiles, it means that we are. So, we have to be stopped. If only by force* [F15].

To a certain extent, the meaning of the events for the people directly involved in the events of August 7th fits in with the tendencies outlined above, with empathy being, in their case, a co-experience to which they give a supra-individual sense.

Alongside the radicalisation of views which is the result of this experience, there also appears—understandable in this situation—fear and the need to focus on one's own well-being.

People who found themselves at the epicentre of the August 7 events ranged from those involved in advocacy for the emancipation of the LGBTQIA community, sometimes knowing Margot personally, to those who accidentally learned about the protest and spontaneously decided to join. Despite the few interviews that have been compiled so far (6), we are able to chart some trends that may translate on a broader scale.

According to those detained, their experience of direct physical police violence is an eye-opener for others, causing them to lose any illusions that they may have about the state's actions against the entire LGBTQIA community: *I think for many people among my acquaintances it has shown that none of us are safe from repression by the authorities. Until now, all my friends, or very many of my friends, lived in a bit of a bubble. They didn't know anyone who had been arrested, who had been mistreated by the police. Now everyone knows this story* [B3]. The events of 7th August are also an eye-opener for those who do not belong to the LGBTQIA community and who have so far distanced themselves from its demands: *I have the impression that this has opened people's eyes a little bit, that even if someone does not agree with this supposed flaunting of gays and lesbians, they do not always like the fact that the police see them in the street and drag them to the police car simply because they have gathered around a car* [B5].

The awareness of being abandoned by the state and its institutions, the brutal behaviour of its officers, results in radicalisation: *That by sticking together we are able to achieve more. Certainly, it shows me personally that I am stronger than I thought, and I can do more. And in fact, I am not afraid of being arrested anymore, I am not afraid of the police* [B1]. The breakthrough dimension of the events of August 7 is perceived: *It was one of those moments when you have the impression that things you thought would never happen in this country are happening before your eyes (...). I had the feeling that people were ready to fight for their rights, for full rights* [B6].

At the same time, however, the loss of the sense of security is also associated with the emergence of a strong fear of uniformed services: *So far, when I see a police car, I freeze, and when policemen pass by – recently, three or four days ago, I was sitting in a pub where a police car pulled up, because it was a bit noisy, and when the officers approached the pub, I simply burst into tears, because the sight of the police, so close by, is still something paralysing to me* [B2]. The detentions also had very personal consequences; they had an impact on the breakdowns of the respondents' relationships, their feeling of being threatened on a daily basis, and their fear of leaving their homes or coming into contact with the police. In several interviews, the subjects mention plans to go abroad after the trials related to the events of August 7th are over. This tendency is known in the community of non-heteronormative people in Poland; there are just a few scientific studies on this issue so far (Mole, 2018).

Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to explore queer activism in Poland from a microsocio-logical level using Gabriel Tarde's imitation and innovation theory. Analysing the historical outline, we can observe that the tactics of resistance and struggle for equal rights for sexual minorities previously undertaken by activists were conceived in early post-communist rule. It was based on accepting the rules of heteronormative majority. As we have seen, these earlier strategies/tactics were non-confrontational and involved a large component of fear and shame resulting from the social context conditioned mainly by two social actors—the Catholic Church and conservative politicians. These earlier strategies were based on the hope that the change will necessarily result from the application of the legal norms of the European Union after the Polish accession.

Using both in-depth interviews with some of the detainees and analysing the diaries, I showed how Tarde's theory of innovation finds its application in the contemporary reality of queer protest in Poland. I found the connection between the individual and the social in the single act of resistance that—through empathy and common sense of oppression—leads to radicalisation. The experience of anarcho-queer protest as well as the suffering of detained persons became absorbed by the personal biographies of people who did not directly participate in the events but can be seen as part of the deterritorialised community. What we can see is a sort of affective identification with the innovator that spurs the imitation.

We can see the radicalised politics of LGBTQIA movement as a “wave of imitation” which is going to collide/is-colliding-now with not only existing older one way of activism (of LGBTQIA NGOs) but with the opposition from heteronormative-conservative society as well. Tarde highlighted three possible runs of what he called “universal opposition”: in a fight, competition or discussion. This results in a further series of the so-called mutual adaptations, thanks to which it occurs over time in social balance. However, the fact is that what in a democratic world we understand as social balance may not be understood in this way in countries with democratic backsliding that we are dealing with in (and not only in) Poland. Two years later, the question arises as to what lasting effect these events will have. On the anniversary of August 7th, Margot and Łania (the member of the collective) announced in a press interview the dissolution of the Stop Bzdurom collective. They firmly rejected the idea of playing the role of leaders and the institutionalisation of the movement. They also decided that the whole of August 7th was one big failure (Ambroziak, 2020). In fact, the dissolution of Stop Bzdurom implied rejection of all the strategies outlined for the LGBTQIA movement by some Polish researchers—from the cooperation with left wing and liberal parties, to the creation of an independent organisation led by a charismatic leader (Bielska, 2018).

How can this affect the further development of the situation of LGBTQIA people in Poland? Still being faithful to Tarde, we can distinguish two possibilities—one is that people will become overwhelmed by a sense of failure and will go back to following the rules of heteronormative majority, imitating its norms in the vain hope of gaining the recognition or at least being left alone. The second option is

a bottom–up action that mimics the innovative action of Margot in 2020 by other people. This would imply a conviction, following Tarde’s way of analysing the French Revolution, that social change does not necessarily rest on the shoulders of charismatic leaders and institutionalised power, but is related to the mimetic spread of innovative ideas and—above all—ways of conduct.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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