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de-centring western sexualities: Central and Eastern European perspectives

Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska, editors, Ashgate, Surrey, UK and Burlington, USA, 2011, 211pp., ISBN: 978-1-4094-0242-8232, £60.00(Hbk)

This edited volume sets out to address the invisibility of 'post-Communist' countries in analyses of the theory, politics and experience of non-heterosexual sexualities. Focusing primarily on homosexuality, the overarching argument is that, even in more recent work that seeks to recognise the absence of accounts on gender and sexuality from outside Europe and North America, tensions *within* Europe have been largely elided. At its broadest, it is proposed, this means that the category of 'the West' actually collapses into 'Western Europe and North America', and at its most reduced, it refers only to a hegemonic vein of Anglo-American experience. This book challenges the West/South binary by introducing and arguing for Central and Eastern European (CEE) sites as neither 'West' nor 'South', but as another 'other'.

'Post-Communist' states are identified in this volume as following a 'time of coincidence' that is analysed against the 'time of sequence' that is presented as prevailing in Anglo-American contexts. The authors suggest that this geopolitical-temporal difference renders time in CEE states as 'queer', which re-problematizes queer theory, and specifically the idea that queer theory is necessarily understood as oppositional to identity politics. As well as offering a critique of temporal constructions, this volume indicates the manner in which the invisibility of CEE experience in references to 'European' sexuality combines with the naming of states within Europe as 'post-Communist' to fix them as an 'other' within the borders of Europe. These themes of time and space successfully combine in many of the volume's contributions as a challenge to static and entrenched readings of 'queer', instead emphasising the movement and flexibility that was core to original conceptualisations of 'queerness'.

Organised into two sections, the first focusing on theoretical debates and politics arising from a re-orientation towards the 'post-Communist', the second grouped around the practice and experience of non-heterosexual sexualities in a sample of CEE states, this is a valuable contribution to the field. Increasingly, attention has been given to the region as an under-investigated site, and courses on 'gender and sexuality' are appearing within academic contexts in CEE, but this book ensures that the two developments remain in dialogue, rather than leaving the 'post-Communist' to be analysed only from the 'outside'.

Within this volume certain contributions were particularly notable. Shannon Woodcock's chapter 'A short history of the queer time of "post-socialist" Romania, or Are we there yet? Let's ask Madonna!' demonstrates that racism cannot be excluded from the analysis of sexuality within CEE, and sets out a challenge to the purported inclusivity of the LGBT movement throughout Europe. The concluding chapter, 'Situating intimate citizenship in Macedonia: emotional navigation and everyday queer/Kvar grounded moralities' by Alexander Lambevski, strikes an excellent balance between narrative and theory, demonstrating that academic analysis can bring an extra dimension of insight into the material experience of living non-heteronormative lives.

Occasionally, as in the case of Jelisaveta Blagojevićs chapter 'Between walls: provincialisms, human rights, sexualities and Serbian public discourses on EU integration', it feels as though, although still a strong piece, the short format of an edited volume compromises complex theoretical arguments. The result of this is that certain elements, such as a justification of the methodology adopted, lack nuance, which undermines the thoroughness of the application of provincialism to the Serbian context. It is possible that this is unavoidable in an interdisciplinary volume that aims to do so much, but it does demonstrate that more work is needed in this area.

The sheer volume of clearly presented and interesting information within this collection makes it an essential reading whether you are approaching it for theoretical insights into queer theory or geopolitical analyses on CEE contexts. This is a book that has learnt from the criticisms of queer theory, and is a coherent and readable collection that, nevertheless, reflects a diversity of experience and analysis that is rare to find. At times, however, critique of the differential experiences of homosexuality according to gender could be more emphatically recognised.

The theoretical depth achieved in this book, particularly in its reworking of temporal assumptions, is impressive given its accessibility and rich 'human' content. However, although it is a valuable contribution to the field, this volume doesn't quite carry out the promise of 'de-centring queer theory', as it retains the Western European narrative as a static referent against which to show difference in the 'post-Communist' states. More attention to continuities and challenges between Central and Eastern European contexts and the work on sexuality emerging from 'other' margins would be needed to really disrupt this binary. Nevertheless, this contribution indicates some ways in which the task of destabilising the centrality of Anglo-American and Western European narratives on queer sexuality can be furthered.

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