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2015 BELGRADE LESBIAN MARCH: LESBIAN SEPARATISM IN PUBLIC SPACE

Abstract

This paper draws upon a variety of empirical sources to reconstruct the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March, and contextualise this public gathering both in the history of gay and lesbian organising in the (post-Yugoslav space as well as in the broader sphere of European and especially Anglo-American lesbian mobilisation. I argue that this lesbian separatist event, on the one hand, increased lesbian visibility both nationally and regionally, but it also created divisions within activist circles that do not seem to advance the overarching goal of non-heterosexual liberation. While pointing to the importance of gender-sensitive understandings of homophobia and the necessity for producing lesbian-centred scholarship, I claim that public space and emancipatory political contestations that take place within it should remain open and inclusive.

Key words: Lesbian activism, lesbian separatism, non-heterosexual emancipation, Belgrade

After almost two highly contentious and sometimes overtly violent decades, 2015 proved to be an *annus mirabilis* in Serbian and post-Yugoslav LGBT organizing (Bilić, 2016a, Bilić, 2016b). That year not only witnessed a relatively smooth unfolding of the Belgrade Pride Parade which has by now become a matter of course, but the streets of the Serbian (and former Yugoslav) capital also welcomed – until then unprecedented – Lesbian March and Trans Pride. This surprising diversity testifies, on the one hand, to the vital current of LGBT-related activist engagement that has survived long periods of both institutionalised and socially widespread homophobia as well as a range of other seriously unfavourable circumstances including poverty, political instability and corruption. On closer inspection, though, such an abundance of activist enterprises, all concentrated in a relatively short period of time, also points to an emotionally-charged “underworld” of tensions, frustrations and

challenges that local activists face in their efforts to advance the cause of LGBT emancipation.

This paper draws upon a variety of empirical sources – including YouTube videos, public statements, newspaper and online interviews, Facebook posts and Google groups “razotkvirivanje”¹ discussions, to reconstruct the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March. I contextualise this rather unusual public gathering – the first of its kind in the post-Yugoslav region – both in the history of gay and lesbian organising in the Yugoslav space as well as in the broader, Anglo-American history of lesbian activism (Bilić, 2012; Bilić & Janković, 2012). The latter exerts global influence on activist initiatives as strategies of protest travel or are “translated” from the “centre” (the United States in this case) towards the “peripheries” or “semi-peripheries” where their incorporation in the logic of domestic political life is accompanied by numerous tensions (Bilić, 2016c, Bilić, 2016d).

More specifically, this paper illustrates how lesbian separatism – the most radical form of lesbian activist organising (activities done exclusively by women for women) – entered the Yugoslav space by examining the trajectory that led to the 2015 Lesbian March. I address the question of how this event became possible in the Spring of 2015 and argue that, on the one hand, such a manifestation indeed increased lesbian visibility in Serbia and the broader, regional public space. On the other hand, though, this event created divisions within activist circles that do not work towards advancing the overarching cause of non-heterosexual liberation. While pointing to the importance of gender-sensitive understandings of homophobia and the necessity for producing lesbian-centred scholarship, I claim that public space and emancipatory political contestations that take place within it should remain open and inclusive (Bilić & Stubbs, 2015; Kajinić, 2003).

In the first part of the paper, I discuss the reasons for and the relevance of studying lesbian activism generally, and in the Yugoslav space, more specifically. These are tightly associated with a set of political concerns that motivate me as a sociologist and gender scholar to engage with the intricacies of lesbian organizing (Mladenović, 2012). I then offer a brief account both of the history of lesbian separatism in the United States where the contemporary LGBT liberation movement was born and of the ways in which contentious developments in Western LGBT and feminist politics were echoed in Yugoslavia. With such an introduction, I hope to provide sufficient background information that will set the stage for a nascent empirical analysis of the Belgrade Lesbian March.

Locating Lesbian activism in Eastern Europe/the Yugoslav Space

The first motivational force behind my interest in lesbian organising is a huge lack of lesbian-related research in the Eastern European and, more specifically, post-Yugoslav social sciences. This lack is associated with the problem that the majority of Eastern European and post-Yugoslav societies still have with the issues of marginality and non-institutionalised, grassroots politics. National/nationalist homogenisation that has been a recurrent issue in Eastern Europe for decades if not centuries, has sustained authoritarian and patriarchal legacies that lead to social science research which is predominantly academic/positivistic, elite oriented, and heteronormative/ heteropatriarchal, if not homophobic, in character. In this regard, my colleague Sanja Kajinić and I (Bilić & Kajinić, 2016, p. 16) have already argued that

research associated with social aspects of sexuality and sexual behaviours, especially those that cannot be subsumed under the heteronormative canon, still seems far away from institutional centres of sociological knowledge production in the region. Such studies, thus, have to be looked for in alternative “epistemic communities” that operate outside of (or are, in different ways, marginally related to) universities and state-funded research institutes. They inevitably count on financial support of foreign donors and hardly ever manage to find their way to the official curricula or readership located outside of the rather narrow circles within which they are produced. All of these factors, along with high levels of homophobia, combine to allow (sexually) non-normative groups and especially the intersections of their multiple positionalities to remain under the sociological radar.

Thus, regional academic institutions orient themselves more towards elite layers of politics which is a practice that either explicitly or implicitly marginalises social movements and activist groups as sources of knowledge and legitimate “objects” of sociological inquiry. This is especially the case of non-heterosexual/lesbian women, so women who are much less or not at all either sexually or financially invested with men.

Secondly, as a gay man and sociologist of gender movements, I am concerned with opposing the so-called gay patriarchy. Gay patriarchy is a reproduction of patriarchy within LGBT activist circles – a (misogynist/lesbophobic) tendency of gay men to dominate and appropriate LGBT struggles. This is a widespread practice that tends to render lesbians and other non-men invisible or less visible within supposedly emancipatory

movements. Focusing on gays and homophobia only gives priority to men and obscures the gender and sexuality intersection of lesbophobia, all various – sometimes very violent – forms of negativity towards lesbians as individuals, couples or social groups. Producing or at least stimulating lesbian-centred scholarship not only subverts patriarchy, but also – and importantly – gay patriarchy. Engaging with lesbian-centred knowledge for me as a male scholar means inhabiting a discomfort zone through which I am coming to terms with the lesbophobia that I grew up with.

Moreover, the third and final reason for studying lesbian activism is my belief that lesbianism or lesbianity is a source of insufficiently acknowledged political potential. This is due to the fact that lesbianity is the intersecting point of two deep forms of discrimination: lesbians are oppressed both as women through misogyny as well as lesbians through lesbophobia, so lesbianity is the very first point where gender and sexual discriminations meet. In this regard, even a cursory look would reveal that modern revolutions up to now – including the French, Bolshevik, Chinese, Cuban or Yugoslav – the one that happened during the Second World War – were all led by men and although they generally drew so many people out of poverty and slavery and improved the conditions of women, all of them nevertheless also failed on the so-called “woman question” – they did not manage to bring about the kind of women emancipation which they had promised. Not only were women left with “double burden” – having to work to earn money and being responsible for a huge amount of unpaid domestic labour, but there was generally little improvement in the sexual sphere which remained rather patriarchal and rendered lesbians invisible again. This is why the earliest forms of lesbian separatist organising were communist and revolutionary in character, quite different from a lot gay activist initiatives today (Browne, Olasik, & Podmore, 2016).

Lesbian Separatism in the United States

When it comes to the history of lesbian separatism in the United States, “its roots are deep and complex” (Enszer, 2016) and this paper cannot do them full justice. Lesbian separatism emerged in more explicit forms throughout the 1970s in the wake of global student mobilisations around 1968 which were embedded in particular national contexts and also included, to a greater or lesser extent, the so-called sexual revolution which challenged traditional sexual behaviours. One of the first definitions

of lesbian separatism comes from the 1970 statement, "The Woman Identified Woman," by Radicalesbians, a New York City based activist group which called on women to focus on

the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other which is at the heart of women's liberation, and the basis for the cultural revolution." This is the same statement in which a lesbian is famously defined as "the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion".

Then in 1971, two women in Ann Arbor, Michigan, started publishing a journal called *Spectre* and used the term Revolutionary Lesbians to describe themselves. They wrote that they were striving for "a non-exploitive communist society" and advocated separatism in a short piece entitled "How to Stop Choking to Death," published in the second issue of their magazine. The two of them defined separatism as "working directly only with women" – which became an operative definition of lesbian separatism for the decades to come.

Moreover, in January 1972, *The Furies: lesbian/feminist monthly* was published for the first time in Washington, DC, bringing a manifesto where The Furies, an activist group consisting of 12 women, stated:

We are angry because we are oppressed by male supremacy. We have been fucked over all our lives by a system which is based on the domination of men over women, which defines male as good and female as only as good as the man you are with. It is a system in which heterosexuality is rigidly enforced and Lesbianism rigidly suppressed. It is a system which has further divided us by class, race, and nationality.

This manifesto defined the most salient issues of lesbian separatism: first, it pointed to lesbianism as a necessary choice for feminists, it highlighted the failure of the "straight women's movement" and the "male left" to address lesbian concerns – something that persists until today; it insisted on the necessity for lesbians to develop a "common politics" of "lesbianism as a political issue," and it emphasised the divisions of class, race, and nationality that challenge and weaken feminism. In this regard, lesbian separatism is not only an ideology, but it is also a feminist process, it is a method of living in and looking at the world which can stimulate alternative ways of being together in women-only communities.

The first “practical public manifestation” of this kind of reasoning was the so-called Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival founded in 1976 and active for forty years until 2015. This festival aimed to provide women a space to come together and celebrate women’s community. All the labour necessary for producing this event was performed exclusively by women. It became one of the most widely known examples of women and lesbian separatism and for many women it was a life changing experience to participate in it, but it was not without controversy. The most contentious issue was related to the admittance of transsexual women – who were never admitted– which is one of the problems that have accompanied instances of lesbian separatism (Trigilio, 2016; Podmore, 2016).

What is more, a strong association of anti-AIDS activism with men throughout the 1980s AIDS yet again rendered lesbian communities invisible and it for this reason that the Lesbian Avengers, an activist organisation founded in 1992, decided to launch the first lesbian march during the National march on Washington for lesbian and gay rights which took place in 1993. Reportedly 20 thousand women participated in this first lesbian march. Lesbian marches appeared as an activist strategy that drew upon the logic of the American pride movement that makes “private” sexualities public by claiming the streets and urban public space (Branner, Butterbaugh, & Jackson 1994). This happened not only because of general lesbian invisibility, but also because it became obvious already in the early 1990s that the mainstream pride movement was becoming increasingly white middle-class men-dominated, institutionalised, professionalised, overly sexualised, de-politicised and commercialised – all of which threatened to reinforce gender asymmetries within the movement (Brown-Saracino, & Ghaziani, 2009; Kates & Belk, 2001). Thus, lesbian marches started taking place before the official pride events, they remained demonstrations with political claims rather than merely parades or highly sexualised parties and in many American cities, organisers contested institutionalisation by, for example, refusing to gain official permits or police permissions to go into streets.

Lesbian marches were, then, supposed to be an inclusive alternative to Pride and to succeed there where lesbian activists believed that Pride parades failed – to be inclusive spaces that contest patriarchy, capitalism, consumer culture, professionalization and depoliticisation of LGBT issues (Ghaziani, & Fine, 2008). Although lesbian marches developed in relation to a specific set of circumstances in the early 1990s, they became a model for lesbian activists and inspired similar gatherings in other parts

of the world, mostly in Western Europe, but also elsewhere (Kulpa & Mizielińska, 2011).

Lesbian Activism in the Yugoslav Space

Gay and lesbian activism started rather promisingly in the 1980s Yugoslavia, in the context of intense civic organising and a gradual weakening of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia that took place after Tito's death. This general relaxation of the political field included a lot of feminist organising, a strong antimilitarist movement, an antinuclear movement and other ecological initiatives. In this regard, for example, Ljubljana claims to have the oldest gay and lesbian film festival in Europe which started in 1984. Although there had been independent feminist organising from at least 1978, the first activist feminist group Lilith was established in Slovenia in 1985.² Within this group there was a lesbian subgroup called *Lezbični Lilit* that became autonomous two years later.³

In socialist Yugoslavia, homosexuality was decriminalised in Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro, as well as in Vojvodina, an autonomous province of Serbia, as early as 1977.⁴ The second wave of decriminalisation took place in 1994 in the rest of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. Decriminalisation of homosexuality in Yugoslavia and Serbia occurred as a result of a routine revision of the penal code and did not come about through grassroots engagement or any kind of wider societal consensus on human rights. Thus, a woman member of the first Serbian LGBT organisation sent a *Report on Lesbians in Yugoslavia* to the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission in which she said:

On July the 14, 1994, our government adopted the draft of the new criminal law. Before the old law was banning homosexuality. However, lesbianism was never a part of that ban. The change came as a total surprise to the gay community. NO ONE in the community "lobbied" for the new law, because it was beyond our power. Our guess is that the change came from someone high up in government.

This absence from law is the first and major sign of lesbophobia – the penal code only referred to male homosexuality without mentioning lesbian sexuality.

The first LGBT activist organisation in Serbia *Arkadija* was registered in 1994, after the decriminalisation and lesbians who gathered within it founded their own organisation *Labris* in 1995. All of this happened in the context of an enormous patriarchal backlash which infringed upon the rights and freedoms that women had won during the rule of the Yugoslav League of Communists. For example, the number of women members of the Serbian parliament went from more than 10% in the communist period to 1.6% in 1990 and the law which had allowed abortion in Yugoslavia already in 1953 was substituted by more restrictive measures under the ever stronger church influence.

With this in mind, the first Pride parade happened after the end of the Milošević regime in 2001 and it was extremely violent, ending with more than 40 seriously injured people, including lesbians. There have been a few other attempts to organise this manifestation, some more successful than others, but all nevertheless characterised by male dominance, heavy police presence, violence threats and increased depoliticisation and involvement of the state pressured by the European Union.

2015 Belgrade Lesbian March

The 2015 Lesbian March took place in the framework of an event called Lesbian Spring organised by a group of lesbians from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and it was supposed to bring together lesbians from the Yugoslav region as well as their friends and supporters from other countries. There is an immediate reference here to the Arab Spring or Prague Spring – where spring is a metaphor of revival, new beginning, political liberalisation and emancipatory change. The poster of the event also included a fist as a symbol of resistance frequently used by social movements, very prominently by the group Otpor that brought down the Milošević regime. The program of the manifestation consisted of a series of workshops and panels and it ended with the Lesbian March.

The first dimension of the March is the wish of the organisers to increase lesbian visibility and provide a critique of patriarchy. In this regard, in a public statement, one of the organisers stated:

Lesbian march is the culmination of the Lesbian spring program which we organised because lesbians are multiply invisible in our society. We are here, we participate in workers' protest, in women protests, in Pride..., but

we are not visible, there are never any lesbians.. other groups are always in the forefront. It is extremely important that women generally, and above all, lesbians – followed by other women comrades including heterosexuals, bisexuals and queer, claim the public space by themselves.⁵

Another aspect of the march is an implicit critique of Serbian gay activism which is perceived as overly patriarchal, male-oriented and professionalised. For example, while announcing the event online, the organisers stated:

Our work is based on feminist principles and is done on a volunteer basis. Our intention is to stand in the way of patriarchy and lesbophobia, and mark 20 years of the lesbian movement in Serbia! We are all aware that social circumstances are extremely negative when it comes to lesbian rights – we are confronted with constant lesbophobia, attacks on lesbians are frequent and it's potentially dangerous to hold hands in public places or show affection.⁶

One more dimension that deserves attention is the march's transnational and antinational or antinationalist character. The video available on YouTube shows that there were also foreign lesbians coming to Belgrade to support their Belgrade friends and point to the necessity of international lesbian solidarity. An even more interesting feature is the strong nationalism critique visible in a banner carried by the participants which says that lesbians from Croatia support lesbians from Serbia. Lesbian liberation, thus, appears as a cause that brings together two countries, former Yugoslav republics, which were at war twenty years ago (Binnie & Klesse, 2012).

However, along with these positive features, the organisation of the lesbian march and the insistence of the organisers that it was for women only, encouraged painful divisions with LGBT activist circles in Serbia. One gay activist who took part in the online debate said:

It is unbelievable that in 2015 a political protest is organised which excludes one sex. My first impression was surprise and incredulity. Why is this being done? I would have understood if it was a private event or a kind of psychological workshop, but that someone is denied access to public space on the basis of sex is scandalously repressive. Let me not even comment on how politically counterproductive it is to exclude male supporters of the lesbian movement and I consider myself one of them.⁷

Moreover, as it often the case, many lesbians did not feel represented or invited, especially those who are closer to the organisers of the Belgrade Pride. One of them wrote on here Facebook profile:

Let me inform you – because I have just found out – that today a lesbian march took place in Belgrade. How do I know this? Of course not because there was a public invitation to lesbians to join and walk together. Of course NOT! Everything was done secretly. (...) What is the fucking point of a demonstration that no one knows anything about, that not all women could learn about? Shame on you!

Also members of the Belgrade trans community felt excluded both by Pride and lesbian march and organised their own protest (Trans Pride) a few months later.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the complexities of LGBT activism in the post-war context of the former Yugoslavia by taking a closer look at the organisation of the 2015 Belgrade Lesbian March. I have argued that this lesbian separatist event, on the one hand, increased lesbian visibility both nationally and regionally, but it also created divisions within activist circles that do not seem to advance the overarching goal of non-heterosexual emancipation (Bilić & Stubbs, 2016). While it is important to point to gender-sensitive understandings of homophobia and stimulate lesbian-centred (sociological) accounts, activist enterprises can only benefit if public space and emancipatory political contestations that take place within it remain open and inclusive.

NOTES

- ¹ This is an open group with publically accessible content and there were 52 posts that followed the march announcement.
- ² According to a Jewish legend, Lilith was the first Adam's wife created from the same dirt as Adam, but she left him because she did not want to become his servant after which Eve is created from one of Adam's ribs.
- ³ All of this can tell you something quite surprising about the relationship between homosexuality and supposedly oppressive and backward socialism as it is often presented nowadays.
- ⁴ As a matter of comparison, homosexuality was decriminalised in Romania in 1996 although the Penal Code introduced by Alexandru Ioan Cuza in 1864 did not differentiate between hetero and homosexual acts because it was inspired by the French penal code which did not criminalise homosexuality.
- ⁵ <http://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/beograd/1531608-lezbejsko-prolece-odrzan-prvi-zenski-gej-mars-u-beogradu-da-li-je-protekao-bez-incidenta>
- ⁶ <http://arhiv2015sr.labris.org.rs/najava-lezbejsko-prolece-u-beogradu-od-16-do-19-aprila/>
- ⁷ Google list razotkvirivanje

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