

Lesbian love in Moscow

Sarajeva, Katja *Lesbian lives: sexuality, space and subculture in Moscow* (diss.). Stockholm University: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis. Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology N.S.4. 2011 (217 pages)

IN HER STUDY of lesbian subculture in Moscow, Katja Sarajeva explores everyday life in the context of post-Soviet Russia. Her focus is on infrastructure and on cultural forms and manifestations. Globalised images of gay and lesbian cultures which are increasingly available are discussed. By highlighting lesbian life as integral part of mainstream society, the dissertation becomes an excellent piece of Russian modern history.

Sarajeva conducted her research in Moscow with some additional fieldwork in St. Petersburg. The fieldwork took place 2005 with some recurring visits during 2006 and 2007. Her study is empirically based on participant observations and interviews.

Sarajeva discusses at length what "subculture" is. She explains that: "At the most basic level, a subculture is a network of social relationships and cultural forms constructed around a certain theme or interest." She contends that the Russian lesbian and gay subculture is made up of different social spaces, "social worlds," both physical and virtual. In these spaces cultural, political and social

features intersect with each other. Physical spaces are lesbian and gay clubs and bars, various meeting venues, such as private homes as well as public parks and events that attract gay people (e.g. concerts). Virtual spaces are Internetbased websites.

Sarajeva provides an historical background of how sexuality and homosexuality were conceived in the Soviet Union and thereafter in Russia. It reflects a hundred years of homophobic history.

This historical background constitutes a platform for analysing current lesbian subculture. Undemocratic Soviet governments and subsequent Russian governments with extensive state control have never tolerated individual political activity in the public sphere. This causes Russians to mistrust each other. The bad experience of enforced collectivism, that exist in Russia even today, leads to a mental obstacle for collective activism. People in Russia have difficulties to work together. This fact is also reflected in the gay and lesbian subculture where people find it difficult to organise themselves.

Sarajeva describes the process in which gays and lesbians started to organise in the early 1980s. A process that intensified during the early years of *perestroika* and *glasnost* in the late 1980s. Gays and lesbians started to establish contacts with each other, for example by disseminating gay and lesbian literature. In the early 1990s many gay and lesbian organisations were established, many had international contacts. The first gay conference in Russia was held in 1991, making the gay community and its subculture visible. In 1993 President Boris Yeltsin abolished Stalin's criminalization of homosexuality from 1933, known as Article 121.

As an individual person cannot interact with the subculture as a whole, the idea of the "imagined community" is at place. Within Russian lesbian subculture the term *Tema* (theme) is used to indicate a sense of belonging. This term denotes same-sex preference. It is

used to refer to the lesbian world in its entirety, with its spaces and people. In contrast to the words "lesbian" or "homosexual" *Tema* is not entangled in the homophobic discourse that prevails in Russia.

Although an "imagined community", the gay and lesbian community experienced difficulties in cooperating. Almost all cooperative efforts soon splintered into individual projects or new unstable coalitions. This tendency continued to dominate the organisational landscape during Sarajeva's fieldwork.

Sarajeva analyses the lesbian and gay subculture by focusing on venues and projects initiated and managed individually by women. For example the "KSP club" and "the Archive". She also studies at length the Moscow Pride 2006, initiated individually by one man and one woman. A park in central Moscow that gay people call *Pushka* is an important venue.

Sarajeva emphasises globalisation as an important factor for the development of the gay movement and its activities. But she contends that the connection to Soviet society has had a greater impact on the character of the lesbian subculture than gay culture in Western countries.

Sarajeva does not draw upon queer theory and she explains why. Russian gays and lesbians do not accept homosexuality as their core identity, because they don't want their sexual interest to be the major determinant of their entire personality. However, this does not imply that they automatically move from identity politics into the realm of queer.

There is little sympathy for identity politics on the basis of gender or sexuality, because this would mean entering a collective, which Russian informants reject. Sarajeva explains that she does not refer to queer theory as it would mean creating a new category for her informants, who were opposed to all kinds of categories, including

queer. To them, the freedom of the individual to decide over her/his own life and personality is the most important principle.

It is interesting that the informants nevertheless use the established categories of masculine and feminine to construct a variety of identities by which they hold a dialogue about their identities. The explanation for why the informants use these categories is that they emphasize "universal characteristics", rather than sexual preferences. These categories do not separate the informants discursively from the rest of the Russian society. The informants are hence not referred to only by one category – the lesbian category – which always had been approached negatively.

Finally some reflections. The title of the dissertation indicates a focus on the "lives" of lesbian women. Life stories focus mainly on the informants' *doings* and not on personal backgrounds. Some lesbian projects serve the analysis of a gay culture jointly for both men and women.

In many ways the evolution of the gay and lesbian life and culture in Russia resembles the situation in other countries. It concerns a collective coming-out, community matters and the development of political movement. This is central for understanding the development of a transnational gay movement. People recognize themselves in others, identify with them and therefore look for cooperation that unifies their struggle for equality in the society.

Sarajeva sees gay life in terms of "subculture". This is a term that gay people rarely use to describe their lives and activities. *Community* or *movement* are more common.

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