



Call for Contributions Queer Balkans

Special Issue
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Background

The “Balkans” is a geopolitical, post-Cold War, “post-communist” concept that comes with an ideological burden, just as “queer” does. Both concepts were historically developed in Western/US Academia, although the origins of queer theory in Anglo-American literary criticism are now being thoroughly contested. There is a great promise and potential in insisting, like Kosofsky Sedgwick does, on deepening and shifting the meaning of queer, as it travels like a “stealth bomber” (Song Hwee Lim) throughout the world. After all, etymologically, the word “queer” means *across*, it derives from the Indo-European *twerkw*, “which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*” (Kosofsky Sedgwick and O’Rourke), the Spanish *atravesar* (Anzaldua), and the South Slavonic *kvar*, meaning trouble, malfunction or to cause malfunction, moral, systemic or machinic failure, to cause discomfort, imperfection, and being distasteful among many other things. To travel queerly then is to transverse, twist, experience discomfort (Ahmed) and cause trouble. Queer is precisely the moment of theoretical and political travel, “movement, motive-recurrent, eddying, *troublant*” (Kosofsky Sedgwick). The aim of this call is to precisely trouble the meanings of the “q” words (the noun *queer*, *queerness*, the adjective *queer*, the verb to *queer*, *queering* or the adverb *queerly*) as they travel to and through the Balkans.

While the “Balkans” (and “balkanization”, Todorova) comes to denote the post-communist/post-Soviet political spaces and has been an instrumental transitional paradigm and empowering term for political scholars and technocrats, “queer” (coined by de Lauretis, though heralded by Anzaldua) served to empower the political and cultural concerns of LGBTIQ people and left-wing academics in America and the West. Subsequently, queer gradually began to empower other regions influenced by the developmentalist paradigm.

We are thus aware that to conceptualize “Queer Balkans” means to work with two exported notions that have conflicting ideologies and design, which we too would like to address.

The Balkans

While the “Balkans” was/is the comprehensive concept for the fragmented “post-communist” countries and contributed to the designation of geopolitical areas previously recognizable through the watchwords of

“communism” and “USSR”, “queer” appears to have similar containing force and appeal for the fragmentation of sexual identities. Joining these two terms together is in itself extremely problematic and contestable to the extent to which a conceptual academic apparatus serves as a colonizing force in a de-communized world. In the post-1989 world the assumption of liberation and democratic transition swept all ideas of political alternatives of liberal democracy - “de-communization”, “post-communism”, “anti-communism” are often the only content of liberal democracy, a world where the newly arrived market economy and free markets were the sole spring of all freedom. Apart from the derision and condescension inherent in “balkanization”, it is very problematic to read the term “Balkans” as politically emancipating vehicle because it conceptualized and helped sustain the very notion of “transition” which was the other name of “neoliberalism”: deregulating the markets and eroding the social state, something which was seen as the hallmark of Soviet-model economies. In the process of (politico-economic) “transition”, the idol of free markets, unrestrained privatization and political corruption brutally swept away our conceptions of solidarity and sociality and replaced them with the social disparities produced by the brand new capitalisms of the Balkans.

Balkanism, a close relative of Orientalism (Said), is a Western discourse containing largely negative and disparaging ideas, attitudes, beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices and sentiments that have circulated and hardened in “the West” over the last two centuries about the Balkans, its peoples, cultures and politics often generalized to such an extent that it deeply informs “Westerners” “actions and practices toward anything or anyone coming from the Balkans” (Todorova). Just a century ago, Western Europeans “added to its repertoire of *Schimpfwörter*, or disparagements” (Todorova) a then new disparaging word that has persisted up to this day. That word is “Balkanization” which has come to signify not only the “parcelization of large and viable political units but also had become a synonym for a reversion to the tribal, the backward, the primitive, the barbarian” (Todorova 2009). Lately, especially in American academia, the word has been “completely decontextualised and paradigmatically related to a variety of problems” (Todorova), including it even in feminist and queer critiques of identity politics, which has been turned into a “anti-hero with a thousand faces” (Bickford).

As Todorova notes, what has been emphasized “about the Balkans is that its inhabitants do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized [read Western] world” (Todorova). In balkanist discourses, the Balkans is not so much (Western) Europe’s Other, but it’s incomplete self, or even more precisely, the lowermost case of this European self, its “shadow, the structurally despised alter-ego” (Schwartz-Salant and Stein). As such, Balkanites can be read as a very queer lot. Any generalization is based on “reductionism, but the reductionism and stereotyping of the Balkans has been of such degree and intensity that the discourse merits and requires special analysis” (Todorova), which we propose to do here in the context of the relationship between queer theory and balkanism.

Todorova’s objection to balkanism as a Western discourse of frozen essentialist images about the Balkans, very much like Said’s critique of Orientalism, is that as a “system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic and complex human reality [in the Balkans or the Orient] from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental [and Balkan] reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient [and the Balkans] from afar and, so to speak, from above” (Said).

Balkanism is “not merely a Western imposition of a reified [Balkan or Oriental] identity on some alien set of people” (Todorova). As Todorova points out, it “is also the imposition of identity created in dialectical opposition to another identity, one likely to be equally reified, that of the West”. People who identify as “Westerners” define the Orient, and the Balkans, “in terms of the West, but so Others define themselves in terms of the West, just as each defines the West in terms of the Other” (Todorova). In this dialectical process of signification and identification, the West emerges as the hegemonic part in the dichotomic pair self-other,

the “standard against which all Others are defined”, which is commensurate to the “historical political and economic power of the West” (Todorova) in the last two centuries. Queer theory, as argued below, does not escape this logic of identification and signification of who and what can be properly called “queer” anywhere in the world.

Queer

Here, it is of crucial importance that homosexuality was now seen under the light of the new (post-Soviet) liberal ideology: that of human rights and dignity that are only possible under capitalist rule. Throughout the transitions in the Balkans, sexual difference was gradually de-pathologized and de-criminalized. This happened to a greater extent with the help (“aid”) of Western organizations and foundations and the international LGBT movement and its funding mechanisms. While helpful in so-called “normalization” of sexual difference, the very generation and support for the establishing of LGBT movements in the Balkans was designed and rather imposed with the combination of the Western “gay liberation model” and the “foreign aid” model. The results of these processes are very diverse and contradictory, often leading to disintegration among LGBTIQ people through the transposition/imposition of Western ready-made activism. In combination with the transposition of EU legislation concerning all kind of minorities and human rights which led to anti-discrimination bills and criminalization of hate speech, today the plight of LGBTIQ communities stands in various oppositions to the morality and values prescribed by Western democracies and non-/governmental programs. Critical perspectives on (LGBT) identitarianism are rarely ever heard because the criminalization of hatred and protection against discrimination silence debates and issues inside the very LGBTIQ communities. As a result there is a very strict model (of values and ideals) that LGBTIQ movements, activists and theorists have to follow.

The usages of the “q” words or the “l” (lesbian), “g” (gay), “b” (bisexual), “t” (transsexual, transgender, or just trans) words in post-socialist Central and Eastern European countries (CEE) follow a different trajectory, since the sequence of Western, particularly US, historical events and the evolution of queer political and cultural theory—from the homophile movement in the 1950s, and early 1960s, gay liberation and lesbian feminism in the 1970s (identity politics), HIV activism in the 1980s, to queer theory and LGBTIQ activism in the 1990s—was collapsed suddenly into the Eastern European “time of coincidence” (Mizielinska and Kulpa), where all models and forms of “Western” engagement (“homophile”, “gay and lesbian” and “queer”) seem to happen at once.

In a sense, after 1989 the “post-communist” region was colonized by both political “balkanization” and LGBT (identitarian) liberation. In this context the alternatives of the new socio-political repressions inside sexual (but also ethnic) communities are almost impossible. This complicates ideas of integration, social acceptance and sexual expression in the Balkans, especially when it comes to sexual difference.

Gays and lesbians in the Balkans are so far from gaining social acceptance despite recent significant legal victories under pressure from the “Western” core of the EU, the term “gay and lesbian” retains its counter-normative, queer edge, and both terms are often used as synonyms in lesbian/gay/queer/trans scholarship and activism. However, while the English term “gay” has gained wide currency in almost all Eastern European languages as a less pathologizing designation for homosexuals (Baer), with many male and female homosexuals in the Balkans widely adopting the term “gay” and “lesbian” respectively to describe how they see themselves, the term “queer” is used in the Balkans in quite small circles of progressive intellectuals and radical activists.

There are considerable theoretical, political and methodological issues with the whole LGBT and queer terminology, which “may travel very fast in our globalised world, [however,] conditions on the ground often prove recalcitrant, generating a fundamental problem of translation: non-equivalence” (Baer). Should we see

in this issue of non-equivalence an unsolvable problem, or should Balkan queer theorists take up the challenge of providing a locally meaningful, semantically and etymologically relevant non-English translation of the “q” words and thus provide “exciting possibilities, and not only for the development for conceptualisations of sexuality, but for broader philosophical questions” (O’Rourke) globally.

Although queer theory’s *raison d’être* is to take a highly critical stand against “hegemonies, exclusions, norms and assumptions” (Giffney), there have been too many instances that clearly demonstrate to what extent queer theory is already deeply plugged in balkanist, Orientalist and other exclusionary discourses, inscribing the very notions of “queer” and “queerness” “with Western hegemonic claims” (Baer), where US/Western European white middle-class queer experiences and social, cultural, political and theoretical development dominate, structure and authorize what can be said under the queer rubric anywhere in the world, including the Balkans, depressingly showing what Khayatt calls the “arrogant certainty” of queer.

In light of the described situation, our general questions are: what is the meaning of “queer” for the geopolitical region identified as the “Balkans”? What is queer’s role as a social alternative in theory, activism, and the social life in general? Can we assume that “queer” could counter the political rigidity of LGBT identitarianism in this specific anti-communist, right-wing (politically and economically) context? Can queer serve as a liberatory tool against the political demands of social atomism and LGBT consumerism imposed by the reigning neoliberal order and its variations in the Balkans? Could we “queer” the Balkans indeed, or are the Balkans already queer or queerer than the West? What is the methodological relevance of queer studies for the academia in the region? Is the very idea of “queering the Balkans” politically potent or is it our own self-colonization (Kiossev) and re-submission to imperialist and Western conceptual apparatus? Is queer disempowering in some way for the diverse cultural and linguistic contexts of the Balkans rather than empowering and capacitating? What are the viable alternatives that queer proposes to LGBT identitarianism and the mere legal re-codification of sexualities?

Deriving from such questions, contributions may address, but are not entirely limited to, the following points of concern:

- Queer and the geopolitics of the Balkans
- Deterritorializing queer/queering territories/the nomos/sovereignty
- LGBT identities, queer and the political construction of the Balkan region (“Eastern Europe”, “South-Eastern Europe”, “Western Balkans”, “Central and Eastern Europe”)
- Unprivileging/Easternizing/De-westernization of queer theory and activism
- Translating queer: cultural translations and contextualizations
- Queer travels: West-East and East-West perspectives
- Queer alliances in the Balkans
- Relations and practices between queer – art – activism in the Balkans
- Queers and cross-cutting activisms (e.g., LGBTIQs and other social movements – feminisms, ANTIFA, anti-racism, etc.)
- The Balkans transition, neoliberalism, and LGBT NGOs
- Queer analyses and critiques of Western LGBT expertise and Western-run/supported activism
- De-NGO-ization of activism and the renewal/making of grass-root activism
- The commodification/bureaucratization/policy-zation of LGBT activism
- Queer theory/activism and/against LGBT identitarianism/activism
- Queer critiques of Pride (Parades) vs. LGBT critiques of queer strategies
- LGBT and/or queer activism: assimilationism/separatism

- Comparative analyses of critiques between LGBT organizations and queer in/formality
- Queer perspectives on discrimination and hate speech in the Balkans
- Critical legal studies and queer theory in the Balkans' context
- Strategies of silencing queer: state-hijacking/appropriation of LGBT/queer activisms and the EU; EU, sexual difference and the civilizational discourse
- Queer theory/activism and the de/politicization of sexual difference
- The Balkans' LGBT/homo/normativity and internalized homophobia/transphobia
- LGBT/homo/normativity and the ethnic/the racial question in the Balkans
- Queer theory and critical race studies in the Balkans context
- Queer theory and methodologies in the academic life in the Balkans

Timeline:

Abstracts submission deadline: September 31 2012

Notifications on proposals: October 30 2012

Articles submission deadline: January 31 2013

Peer review: February-April 2013

All proposals, containing no more than 500 words, must be submitted through the proposal submission form at <http://www.sextures.net/authors>. Papers equally must be submitted through the paper submission form at <http://www.sextures.net/authors>. Please follow the guideline for contributors (<http://www.sextures.net/guidelines-for-contributors>) when preparing your submissions. Authors are strongly encouraged to submit their papers well before the deadline.

If you have any questions regarding your proposal or paper contact Stanimir Panayotov, spanayotov@gmail.com, or Alexander Lambevski, alex@sextures.net.

About Sextures:

SEXTURES is a joint initiative of a group of intellectuals, writers, critics, and activists scattered throughout the world, who have a passionate interest in the theory and practice of sexuality in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe. Some of us work in academia, while others work as freelance researchers, critics, curators, artists, journalists, commentators, and activists. Most of us, whether we live in the never ending transitional nightmare that many parts of the Balkans and Eastern Europe have turned into, or carve out an uncertain existence as intellectual, economic and cultural migrants working on the margins of the globalized information economy/ies of the developed world, feel close to each other in our experience of ongoing social, economic, academic and cultural precarity. For some of us our sexualities add another intense emotional layer of precarity that deeply affects how we see and know the world.

More at: <http://sextures.net/about-us>

About the guest editor:

Stanimir Panayotov holds a BA in Philosophy (Sofia University, Bulgaria) and MA in Philosophy and Gender Studies (Euro-Balkan Institute, the Republic of Macedonia), and is a junior researcher and PhD student in the same establishment. He has published and translated at the intersections of continental philosophy, gender and queer studies internationally. His PhD thesis concentrates on the fundamental relation between desire and space in general and queer and space/cosmos/cosmology in particular. Stanimir also translates from English

and Macedonian and has translated in the same fields authors such as Adrienne Rich, Eve Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Diana Fuss, Jasna Koteska, David M. Halperin, Derek Jarman, and others. He has also been an activist of the Bulgarian LGBT movement for the last 10 years.