

Rhizomatic LGBTIQ+ Activism in St. Petersburg
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Pauliina Lukinmaa's doctoral thesis, *LGBTIQ+ Activists in St Petersburg: Forming Practices, Identifying as Activists and Creating Their Own Places*, analyses how lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans people and those who identify as queer (LGBTIQ+ people) manage to do activism in Russia under increasing state oppression and in an environment that is generally hostile towards sexual and gender diversity. Other current studies analyse growing anti-queer violence in Russia as a consequence of homophobic legislature and culture (see, e.g. Kondakov 2022). Lukinmaa, however, approaches queer people's lives in this authoritarian context with a different, experimental, optics that portrays the LGBTQ+ movement in a rhizomatic form with the capacity to remain flexible, ever moving, situational and unstable but also productive, diverse and yet targeted. She provides a lively thick description and analysis of the activist network, firmly situated in a specific time and place, in the 2010s, in St Petersburg, a Russian metropole, a cultural city and an LGBTIQ+ hub, in late 2010s, currently experiencing repressive laws but before the Covid pandemic and Russia's attack on Ukraine, both of which have had a damaging influence on Russian civil society.

The book is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork that the author conducted in St Petersburg between the years 2017 and 2019. In addition to participant observation by Lukinmaa at various events and activities, she conducted 45 interviews with activists divided into three overlapping groups: those active in the registered LGBT organisations, those taking part in grassroots groups and those she has chosen to call influencers. Moreover, the fieldwork was not limited to the time she spent in St Petersburg. Lukinmaa stayed in touch with the research participants between her field trips to Russia and conducted online interviews with activists who had emigrated abroad. Therefore, her study also includes a focus on transnational networks of LGBTIQ+ people.

The study consists of an introduction, which presents the research problem, an extensive analytical chapter on the century-long history of non-normative sexuality and gender expression in Russia, and chapters on locating

the field the field, her methods and theories. In each section, the author offers an elaborate and transparent view on how the study was conducted and discusses her research choices as well as her complex positionality in the field as an activist, a friend and, most of all, a researcher. We find this work makes a strong contribution to the insider-outsider debate and the discussion on ethics in ethnographic research as well as the core and peripheries of anthropological knowledge (Martínez et al. 2021).

The empirical findings of the thesis are addressed in three chapters, where the research questions are answered one by one. First, Lukinmaa describes the activists' position and tactics within the repressive context of the 'anti-gay propaganda law', approved in 2013, and the generally homophobic environment. Second, she addresses activists' identifications and negotiations with the stigma and a sense of belonging as well as the complexity of how Russianness intersects with sexual identities under threat. Third, Lukinmaa analyses how the activists construct the city space of St Petersburg as theirs and carve out places for demonstrations, events, meetings and parties. The thesis ends with a concluding discussion that ties the threads together, highlights the contributions of the work for the academic discussion and points to future directions.

Lukinmaa's theoretical approach engages with Hannah Arendt's concept of praxis and especially with Michel de Certeau's concept of tactics together with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome. Using these tools, she paints a nuanced picture of how the activists negotiate with the state oppression they face, the often hostile environment around them and the multiplicity of identifications and mutual replacements within the movement. We would also highlight that the author succeeded in tying together the so-called 'Western' mainstream with Russian (and Finnish) theories on equal terms and in combining different theoretical streams. To study the positionality of LGBTIQ+ people and address non-normative sexualities outside modern identities in particular, she bases her discussion on Bahtin's concept of outsideness (*vnenakhodimost'*) and utilises Tuula Juvonen's (2002) conceptualisation of homosexually-desiring people. Queer theory, however, is not present as much as it perhaps could be in the empirical part of the work, and some of the concepts used in the study, such as belonging, could have also played more of a theoretical role in the work.

A rich ethnography of how the current St Petersburg activist scene works is preceded by an extensive cultural history, or historical sociology, of homosexually-desiring people in Russia. The timeline runs from the creative period, in pre-revolutionary times, through the repressive Soviet times, to liberation in the 1990s, then the conservative turn of 2010s and today's political repressions. This genealogy knits together various discourses on LGBTIQ+ in Russia,

including artistic (elitist and popular), legislative, criminal, medical and civic discourses from diachronic and synchronic perspectives. This elaborate and systematised historical background introduces to the reader the legacy of the current survival tactics of the Russian LGBTIQ+ movements. The researcher shows how the rhizomatic network of current activists is able to make use of even the smallest cracks in the oppressive and surveillance-oriented regime, and also how the extensive 'surplus' that is left outside the normative ways of doing gender and sexuality in Russia allows the activists to explore new ways of living, loving and belonging. Apart from analysing its topic, the study also takes indirect but relevant and detailed excursions into various aspects of the everyday in Russia and St Petersburg in particular. For example, the reader can learn from the thesis about the housing and transport systems in the city, its territorial structure and position with respect to internal migration flows, including examples from mainstream pop culture and menus of the coffee houses. All these vignettes paint a panoramic picture of the context in which the research participants act, and they make the text an informative piece also for a reader who does not know St Petersburg well. Therefore, the work can be attributed to the best traditions of cultural studies.

We find Lukinmaa's book an excellently written and quite accessible academic study. Her monograph provides an analysis of the multiple aspects of the rhizomatic movement of LGBTIQ+ activism – despite severe oppression and legislation that makes the work difficult, the movement has managed to survive and succeed. This is an essential contribution to the research on publicly invisible, hidden forms of civic activism in closed, non-democratic contexts. We believe that the book will interest a wide range of scholars – sociologists and anthropologists in particular – engaged with gender and queer studies, cultural and urban studies, as well as studies on civil society.

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