

A Hundred Years of Estonian Queer History

Rebeka Põldsam. 2023. *“Why are we still abnormal?!” History of Discourses on Non-Normative Sex-Gender Subjects in Estonia*. University of Tartu: Department of Ethnology. (172 pages)

SINCE THE 1990S queer histories of the former Soviet republics has begun to emerge. However, in comparison to historical studies of the US and Western Europe, the field is still small in scope. The dissertation by Rebeka Põldsam *“Why are we still abnormal?!” History of Discourses on Non-Normative Sex-Gender Subjects in Estonia* is a step towards filling in some of the blank spaces regarding the queer histories of Estonia by examining how dominant discourses of non-normative sex-gender subjects have been constructed, lived and contested between 1920 and 2020. The dissertation proposes a theoretically ambitious project, connecting Barad and Butler in order to study both intra-agential connections and hegemonic discourses by using diffractive readings as the main methodological approach.

The dissertation is a compilation consisting of four peer reviewed articles, and a summary article. Together the articles span a long time frame, and give temporal and thematic deep dives into different periods and topics. Turning to Estonian print media, Põldsam’s first article is an analysis of how non-normative sex-gender practices and people were represented in the interwar period 1926–1936. The article shows that the

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definitions of non-normative sex-gender identities were vague in this period, but also how legal eugenic discourses framed public representations. Põldsam's second article examines the Soviet Estonian official discourses about non-normative sex-gender practices and subjects – primarily men who had sex with men – through the implementation of the Soviet period Pederasty Article, with a special focus on Tallinn and Tartu city and county court archives from 1956 to 1991. The court material is complemented by a reading of representations of homosexuality in Soviet era print media. Põldsam points towards how a medical discourse established through widely spread sexual education handbooks informed understandings of homosexuality, and the legal discourse of the penal code both contributed to an official Soviet discourse that conflated homosexuality and paedophilia and led to clandestine homosexual lives.

The third article describes emergence of the Estonian lesbian, gay and trans equal rights advocacy in the context of the Estonian national liberation movement from 1988 to 1993, and convincingly shows the role played by translocal social movement activists. This is built on oral history interviews, archival sources and print media. The fourth article analyses queer entanglements and affects in present day Estonia, through qualitative interviews with persons engaging in non-normative sexual practices and ways of life. The main results are that a dominant Soviet era discourse on gender and sexuality still lingers and result in an involuntary nonconformity, and that present-day neoliberal rationality presents a promise of happiness that can never be attained.

This dissertation has a strong claim to originality in the empirical findings and the results are especially important in relation to the field of queer history. The dissertation gives a good account of continuities and change in dominant discourses on sexuality during the last 100 years. Further, it also makes some lived queer experiences visible (primarily but not exclusively connected to men who had sex with other men). On one hand, the overarching concept of non-normative subjectivities being produced through dominant discourses (often described as heteronormativity) convincingly shows continuity through three distinct political

contexts in the summary article. On the other hand, the same overarching claim to continuity makes some historical specificities that emerge through the individual articles less clear. However, this should be understood as indicative of the wealth of potential research uncovered by this dissertation. It is clear that this dissertation contributes in a very meaningful way to a wider societal context – not in the least in uncovering and bringing to light non-normative subjects from the past.

The dialogue with previous research, as well as the empirical work, show the value of decentring queer history from an Anglo-American canon. As shown by Põldsam, historical, geographical and political contexts form specific dominant discourses as well as specific experiences of living through them. Nonetheless, the account of the previous research would have benefited from a critical account of a larger part of the Anglo-American canon. I particularly want to point towards the field of queer urban history, which to a large extent work with court and police records. Such engagement would have opened for strengthening some of the key findings in the dissertation by comparison. For instance, how does the chairman's tale from article II compare to the post war experiences of men who were prosecuted for having had sex with other men in post war London or Berlin (both West and East)? Further, there is a smaller Nordic field of queer history, both in regards to the policing of homosexuality and in regards to queer social movement. A deeper engagement with the Nordic field would have further contextualised the findings – not in the least since the article on emergence of queer social movements in Estonia points towards a role being played by Nordic queer social movements in article III.

In conclusion, Põldsam has made an important contribution to the field of queer history. As the author convincingly shows, there is a pressing need for more queer historical research done on the second world in general and the former Soviet republics in particular. Moreover, the dissertation works with some remaining archival sources in a highly productive way, as well as with oral histories. The archival sources shown are fascinating and leave at least this reader wanting for more, and the dissertation shows that broader and deeper archival work with these

kinds of sources is not only possible but also necessary. The empirical findings further our knowledge on how non-normative sexualities were discursively formed and lived in the particular historical and geographical context of Estonia during large parts of the last century. The empirical findings also highlight the pressing need to collect queer oral histories, primarily from the Soviet period when other forms of sources are scarce, before living memory fades with older generations passing.

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