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## PRODUCTION OF MORALITIES AND THE POLITICS OF NORMAL: AIDS DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES IN POLAND

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### **Hanging the flag**

In the days and weeks following the Pope's death in April of this year, public space in Poland became a staging ground for displays of respect and mourning for the man who had come to embody ideas of Polish national identity and pride for several decades. The streets of Warsaw were decorated with three flags that hung from offices, homes, and government buildings: the Polish national flag, the Warsaw city flag, and the Vatican flag; strips of black cloth were added to the Polish flag, symbolizing this national loss; candles and flowers provided colorful and visible impromptu memorials throughout the city; and pictures of the Pope, supplied for free in one of the national newspapers, appeared in store and apartment windows, and a gigantic, five story picture of the Pope was even hung on the "famous" Palace of Science and Culture in the center of Warsaw. During the week-long official national mourning, everyday at noon all public transportation stopped in observance of a minute of silence; hip-hop and dance radio stations changed a week's worth of programming in order to broadcast classical, jazz, and "easy listening" music; masses were celebrated in public squares, attended by tens of thousands of people, who traveled to Warsaw from all over the country. Street vendors quickly began selling framed pictures of the Pope, accented with a black stripe in the corner to mark that the Pope had died. The fans of rivaling Polish soccer teams even declared a truce in the name of national solidarity. The passing of the Pope bore witness to grand and public displays of the often repeated idea that to be Polish is to be Catholic, as well as a sense of "belonging" to Poland.

The Pope's death occurred on a Saturday, and the following Monday, I attended an HIV prevention program at a gay right's organization in Warsaw, as I had done for many months prior. Hanging from the balcony outside of this organization is the familiar, international symbol of the gay rights movement, a rainbow flag, along side the blue and yellow flag of the European Union. Soon after this night's meeting began, one of the regular attendants of these meetings pulled a folder from his bag, which contained what could

be considered a "Pope kit." It included a Polish flag with the black ribbon and various pictures of the Pope. Before the group's leader arrived, Feliks took the opportunity to go to the balcony and hang the Polish flag, adorned with the black ribbon, next to the rainbow and EU flags. When the group's leader finally arrived, Feliks took her arrival as an opportunity to ask her if it was okay that he had hung this Polish flag on the balcony. Unsure, she took her cell phone from her bag and said that she would check by asking the president of the organization, and sat at the table typing a text message to him.<sup>1</sup> This process of typing, sending, and waiting for a reply took several minutes, during which time Feliks waited impatiently, asking repeatedly if he had permission. When her phone beeped, signaling that she had received a reply, she picked up her phone and read the message to the group: the president responded that because it was a period of "national mourning" and because "We are Polish," it was okay to hang the flag.

### **Introduction**

Why was the question about raising the Polish flag so controversial for this gay rights organization, and why did the organization's president respond by making a declaration of "Polishness"? I draw on this ethnographic moment to explore some of the key ways a marginalized and stigmatized social movement in Poland makes claims about citizenship and inclusion in the broader social whole. More specifically, this paper uses HIV education, prevention and "talk" in contemporary Poland in order to inquire into the ways it becomes an arena in which both gay rights activists and their opponents make claims about Polish nationhood. Through attention to this problem, I demonstrate current contestations over who is and is not seen to be included in the "Polish nation," and highlight some of the strategies by which minority groups fight for inclusion within this citizenry.

I draw on 13 months of field work, including participant observation in HIV prevention programs and interviews with various people involved in HIV prevention work in Warsaw, to explore the ways in which issues surrounding HIV/AIDS, such as sexuality,

tolerance, and rights and responsibility, are used by certain groups to make arguments about their visions of Polish society and argue for the creation of particular forms of Polish society. Such claims become coded in discourses of the "normal" Pole." I suggest that HIV/AIDS, in terrains of moral and political contestation, has become a battle ground on which different social contingents stake claims about Poland's present and the direction of its future.

## Background

From a historical perspective, the association between homosexuality and HIV has been equally positioned as problematic in Poland, an ambivalence that quickly found its way into political-social strategies and discourses.<sup>2</sup> During the socialist period, Poland was the only country in the Soviet bloc that did not criminalize homosexuality between consenting adults<sup>3</sup>, a legal tradition with roots in the pre-World War Two Constitution. This lack of criminalization, however, did not amount to parallel social freedoms and visibility. Gays in socialist Poland lacked public places such as clubs and bars where they could openly meet, and little was written about gay life during this time, particularly in public press. When homosexuality was mentioned, for example in medical textbooks, it was discussed as a psychological disorder that resulted from problems within the family. Homosexuality itself was officially perceived as an "invention" of Western decay and therefore both a threat to the socialist project and an unwelcome sign of its failures (Majka-Rostek 2002:200). At the same time, homosexuality remained within the purview of the socialist state apparatus, which suspected that gay people were involved in the opposition movement and that identified them as members of a "subculture" that would meet informally in designated places.<sup>4</sup> The "problem" of homosexuality in socialist Poland was made evident during the 1980s when the Citizens' Militia<sup>5</sup>, following the recommendation of the Minister of the Interior, began what was known as "Operation Hyacinth." In this action, functionaries of the Militia entered into schools, universities, and workplaces, and took those suspected of being homosexual to the police headquarters where files were made for them that included fingerprints and photographs. They were questioned about sexual contact with others; forced to sign documents declaring their homosexual activity; and persuaded into cooperating with secret service. Following this action, in an interview for "In Service of the Nation," the spokesperson for the Citizens' Militia

justified the Hyacinth actions through references to the "parasitic and criminal elements in that community" (Kopka 1986:13). The Hyacinth action, therefore, was an attempt to curb this activity. The gay community was also perceived to be responsible for the "demoralization" of Polish youth and spreading prostitution. Moreover, organizers of the Hyacinth action suggested that it was necessary for the Citizens' Militia to maintain an interest in "particular sexual tendencies" as a means of protecting society from the danger of AIDS (Swieczynski 1988). Those active in the gay community at the time, however, counter that the action was undertaken in order to destroy the birth of a gay rights movement in socialist Poland. The point here is that during the earliest days of the virus's appearance in socialist Poland, it became entangled in contestations of Polish national politics and a means of suppressing a particular social minority.

Two years later, the recognition of gays as some sort of "cultural minority" occurred in conjunction with perceptions of a growing and imminent threat of an HIV epidemic.<sup>6</sup> Earlier, homosexuality was written about in medical and sexuality textbooks as one subject within a broader range of topics, most often in discussions of sexual deviations or psychological disorders, and focused mainly on its sexual aspects.<sup>7</sup> The late 1980s, however, marked a turning point in the way homosexuality was addressed in both popular and academic literatures in Poland, with the publication of one of the first books written in Polish exclusively about homosexuality. This book, in addition to including a discussion of the causes and history of homosexuality, also included discussions of personal and social lives of gay people<sup>8</sup> (Adamska 1998:31). In the author's introduction to the book, he suggests that it is necessary to understand this particular group, especially patterns of sexual behavior, due to the high frequency of AID within this community (Boczkowski 1988:10).<sup>9</sup> He later makes this need more explicit, writing that AIDS<sup>10</sup> makes necessary understanding "every issue related to homosexuality" (Boczkowski 1998:166).<sup>11</sup> In other words, in the late socialist period, HIV made homosexuality "mentionable" and an object worthy of scrutiny.

While many involved in gay rights activism view the transition to a democratic government to have a positive effect on their position within Polish society, providing them with the freedom to formally register their organizations and the legal structures to engage in



political lobbying (Majka-Rostek 2002), problematic associations between homosexuality, politics, and HIV remain. They reemerged in June of this year in the conflicts surrounding the attempts to hold a "Parade of Equality" in Warsaw as part of the "Days of Equality." In brief, gay rights' activists wanted to hold a parade on the streets of Warsaw as the culmination of an international conference that discussed the position of sexual minorities in Poland within the context of the European Union. The parade, however, was banned by the president of Warsaw,<sup>12</sup> which sparked a public debate not only about the position of sexual minorities in Poland, but more broadly what "Polish" means in the post-socialist, European Union context. Those in favor of the parade contended that holding the parade was a legal right under the Polish constitution and banning the parade mounted to a violation of Polish, European, and international law, including a violation of human rights. Moreover, it was argued, holding such a parade was necessary in order to publicly demonstrate to Poles that first, gays are "normal" Polish citizens and second, that Poland is a democracy in which those holding opposing view points have the right to publicly demonstrate them. Those in opposition to the parade invoked the argument that gays are "not normal" and holding the parade presented a threat to Polish traditions, values, and morals. The "non-normality" of homosexuality was linked to perceived sexual deviance that was seen as posing both a moral and physical threat to "normal" Poles. For example, in a ten-point argument against the parade published as an editorial in the national newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, a priest justified the parade's ban by invoking images of sexual deviation that equated homosexuality with necrophilia, bestiality, incest, pedophilia, and promiscuity, leading to the explosion of the AIDS epidemic. The parade, despite an official ban, was held as planned and the participants were protected by the police from aggression by protestors. The following weekend, the political party League of Polish Families organized—and legally held—a march in Warsaw that they termed "the Parade of Normality." The response by the gay rights community: they did not protest the Parade of Normality because they recognized that, first, such parades are permitted in a democratic society and second, that gays too are normal and therefore had no reason to protest such a parade.

### HIV Programs

Whereas the argument against the parade invoked the image of HIV threatening "normal"

(read: heterosexual) Poles, the Polish gay rights activists themselves have also paid attention to this vulnerability. During the late 1980s, informal gay groups began to form, using the argument that there was a need to protect both themselves and wider Polish society from the threat of HIV (Kolodziejski 1987:22). After the fall of socialism, gay rights activists seized the opportunity to formally register their organizations. Within the four main goals of the Warsaw gay rights organizations, two of them were dedicated to HIV: the first to promote behavioral guidelines to prevent HIV and the second to cooperate with social and governmental organizations in the field of HIV prevention and fighting AIDS in general (Adamska 1998: 101).<sup>13</sup> It may appear that the incorporation of HIV prevention programs into the activities of a gay rights organization within a context of continued association between sexual deviance, "non-normality" and marginalization creates a dilemma of identity politics (see also Krawczyk-Wasilewska 2000:68).<sup>14</sup> But returning to the example presented earlier at the HIV prevention program immediately following the Pope's death, and a closer examination of the ways in which these programs work shows that such programs can actually serve as a form of subversive politics of action and identity contestation and formation.

In Warsaw, HIV prevention programs targeted at Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) take two forms. The first (to which I had access) are stationary places that offer set hours each week to which people can come and get advice from a doctor or counselor. In the second, teams of usually two trained counselors go out to the streets where prostitutes work and to gay clubs and hand out information and talk with "clients."<sup>15</sup> I spent time participating in and observing one of these stationary programs, which were attended by anywhere between five and fifteen people each week, mostly young men in their early twenties, some of them prostitutes and some not. Most of the young men attending the weekly HIV prevention program are doubly, or perhaps triply, positioned beyond the moral order through their homosexuality, prostitution, and marginalized economic positions. Instead of centering on what I would have considered to be discussions of "safe sex," these meetings consisted of drinking tea and coffee, eating small snacks such as instant soups, and talking about a variety of topics rarely dealing with HIV. The topics of discussion during any given meeting ranged from local and national politics, gossip about events that occurred over the

weekend, and discussions of television programs. Those attending these weekly meetings could also make use of the computers and access the internet free of charge, allowing the attendants to work on resumes, check email, and search for information for papers they had to write for their classes.<sup>16</sup> In addition, they also could talk privately with counselors regarding a range of issues, such as problems with partners, work-related issues, problems with substance abuse, and legal matters. Sometimes a medical doctor was present to answer health—but not necessarily HIV or sexuality-related questions that someone might have.

When I talked with the volunteers, employees, and directors of these programs regarding how this program fits with ideas of HIV prevention, a common theme emerged: these programs and the spaces in which they occur offer the clients a chance, in their words, to “be normal.” They can talk openly about their sexuality and work in a way that they are not permitted in their daily lives. Moreover, as the form of the programs indicates and as was reiterated in conversations with those working at these programs, the range of services and opportunities offered at these HIV prevention programs paralleled the idea that these clients are not vessels of potential disease threats. Rather, the employees and volunteers see their “clients” as people with a variety of needs and vulnerabilities and deserving respect and dignity. Moreover, the way the clients of these programs are perceived to be at risk for HIV is also significant. When asked why particular people are “at risk” for HIV infection, those involved in these HIV prevention programs are quick to point out that *everyone* is “at risk” for HIV. They make no distinction that their clients are particularly vulnerable as a result of their sexual orientation or livelihood.

## Conclusions

“This is a period of national mourning.... [And] We are Polish,” the president of the gay rights organization reminded the men who had collected for a weekly HIV prevention and social support meeting. This statement echoes and exemplifies the broader agenda that shapes Polish gay rights groups’—the struggle to redefine the boundaries of the Polish nation to ensure that they are included within it, that they can legally hold a parade in downtown Warsaw (or other cities) and feel assured that the state Constitution guarantees them protection from their opponents. As Poland continues to negotiate its new position as a member of the European Union and come to terms

with its socialist past, homosexuality has become one means through which perceived conflicts between democracy and freedom, on the one hand, and national identity and traditions, on the other, are discussed.<sup>17</sup> When references to HIV/AIDS are added to this debate, notions of biological vulnerability become entwined with imaginations of the relationship between social groups. In the example here, those attending and designing this particular HIV program among gay men have constructed the program in a way that challenges arguments against them that they are “not normal.”

The link between HIV and homosexuality has implications for political activism as well. On the one hand, by calling attention to biological vulnerability, those active in the Polish gay rights movement, both historically and today, have mobilized resources (symbolic and material) available through HIV as one way to justify the development of organizations centered on issues of importance to them, including health. On the other hand, in the Polish context of anti-gay sentiment, focus exclusively on the vulnerability of gays to HIV (for example, through the city government giving money to a gay organization for HIV prevention programs only) can serve to maintain marginality and detract attention from other issues of importance to sexual minorities, such as discrimination and intolerance. Anthropological and other social scientific studies of HIV/AIDS emphasize that responses to AIDS are always political, and are built on previous knowledge and systems of meaning (Schoepf 2001:338). In the Polish context, the politics of gay identity have implications for the possible range of programs that can be implemented and the ability of those dedicated to this topic to create programs that more effectively meet the needs of their clients in a context of marginalization.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> That Feliks had to ask to hang the flag presents a dilemma of the position of this HIV prevention group within Lambda more general. From my observations, this group seemed to be marginal to activities and concerns of the organization.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the history of homosexuality within socialist Poland, see Kurpios, n.d.

<sup>3</sup> In the legal code, an “adult” was defined as someone over 15 years of age (Boczkowski 1988:69).

<sup>4</sup> These places were known as "pikieta," and in Warsaw they were located, for example, at Plac Trzech Krzyzy and the main train station. As one of my informants told me, the train station was known more for "prostitution" but in general he described these pikiety as places where homosexuals would meet to find partners for sex. He did not mention other functions of these meetings, although I can imagine that there were others.

<sup>5</sup> Milicja Obywatelska (MO) was the term used for the law-enforcement organization, rather than "police."

<sup>6</sup> Although in this paper I address specifically the ways in which popular and medical sources "created" homosexuals as a group worthy of study and attention through reference to their vulnerability to HIV—or more specifically to the "threat" of HIV's spread among this group and eventual presumed spread to "the Polish population, it is important to note that gay rights activists also played a crucial role in engaging in political activism after 1989 in order to get themselves recognized as a group deserving specific rights. This issue will be discussed in future writing.

<sup>7</sup> Discussions of homosexuality were not completely absent from popular press. For example, in 1986 the letter of a sixteen-year-old boy seeking advice about his sexuality was published in the advice column "Sztuka Kochania" ("The Art of Loving") in the teen magazine *Razem* ("Together"). In the letter, the author describes his experiences with the Citizen's Militia as a result of his contacts within the homosexual community and his attempts to understand his own sexuality. This letter instigated a series of letters and articles about homosexuality.

<sup>8</sup> Note that this discussion was mostly about homosexuality among men and mostly based on literature and studies from Western European and the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, in the 2003 edition to this book, while HIV is still mentioned, it has been removed from the books introduction and entered a chapter entitled "Swiat homoseksualny a swiat heteroseksualny," which discusses the types of stereotypes and accusations that are often made about homosexuals. Neither HIV nor AIDS appears in the books index.

<sup>10</sup> Nowhere in the text does the author differentiate HIV from AIDS, and he uses AIDS throughout the text even in instances when he is clearly talking about the virus and not the result of this virus's presence in the body.

<sup>11</sup> The history of drug users as a group worthy of the public's attention can be taken as an interesting point of contrast with gays. The concern for drug users as a social group began before the appearance of HIV, through the work Marek Kotanski, founder of the Polish-wide network of drug prevention and addiction treatment centers (MONAR) at the beginning of the 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> Lech Kaczynski, president of Warsaw during the controversy over the parade, later went on to win the Polish national presidential elections in October 2005.

<sup>13</sup> The other two goals of the first Lambda organization are promoting social tolerance towards homosexuality and forming a positive self-identity among gay men and women.

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note a contrast between the gay rights activists' response to the phenomenon of HIV in the United States and Poland. In the United States, organizations such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and the Gay Men's Health Crisis took a decidedly political and aggressive approach to fighting for attention to be paid to this disease among gay men and to gain access to cheaper anti-retroviral therapies. In Poland, gay rights organizations focus more on support groups, help lines, and HIV education and prevention, rather than political and social agitation. In an essay exploring the differences between these approaches, Basiuk (2004) argues that the strategy of agitation is not available to Polish gays due to accusations that are made against them of being "immature," as shown in the writing of the priest Jozef Augustyn, a Catholic expert on homosexuality. By using methods of political agitation that involve aggression, Basiuk suggests, the association between homosexuality and immaturity, and eventually psychological instability will be further strengthened and justified (p.194).

<sup>15</sup> The term "client" is used by those working at the programs almost exclusively when referring to those who attend these programs. The significance of this terminology will be explored in future writing.

<sup>16</sup> While the majority of those attending this program are unemployed and lack higher education, some attendants are enrolled in university courses, speaking to the diversity within the group who attend the HIV programs.

<sup>17</sup> The power of references to homosexuality as a means of action in Poland became exceedingly clear on the morning of October 20, 2005. On this morning, the city became paralyzed after at least fifteen packages with the word "bomb" written on them were discovered around the city. These packages, which later proved to be a hoax, were inscribed with slogans such as "Gay Power" and "Kaczynski=War." The power of homosexuality was also made clear to me during the run-up to the Polish presidential elections in the fall of 2005. People who were not supporters of Kaczynski mentioned rumors that presidential candidate Lech Kaczynski's twin brother Jaroslaw, the leader of the political party Law and Justice, was gay, a piece of information that could be useful in an attempt to "smear" the Kaczynski brothers' name and prevent them from winning the elections.

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