Embodying Masculinity and Ethnicity in Macedonia

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Introduction

What is masculinity? What are its indicators and who defines them? What role play women in the establishing and reproduction of the notion of the masculine gender? How does ethnicity, nationality and class influence gender?

In the following essay I try to briefly analyze these questions basically by discussing the implications of masculinity according to ethnicity on the basis of Albanian men living as a state declared minority in the majority society of Macedonians. The reason that I chose Albanian men living in Macedonia is related to my own fieldwork experiences in Albania and Macedonia during the last two years. However, I will basically refer my knowledge to two articles by Rozita Dimova (2006) and Shasho Lambevski (1999) who analyze masculinity in relation to ethnicity in Macedonia, in the first case from the scholarly perspective of a homosexual male ‘insider’ of the gay scene in Skopje and in the second from a female outsider studying notions of masculinity in the heterosexual Albanian community.

Masculinity, Sex and Gender

In reference and accordance to Butler (1990) I want to argue that the biological gender, as well as the social gender is a politically and socially constructed reality which is nothing else than the product of a discourse of society and specific power constallations.

Dimova writes “a 'real man' was represented as a person who was fully in charge of his public and private affairs (his job and his family). He was also a person who could demonstrate sexual prowess, especially in relation to women from other ethnicities” (Dimova 1999:306f). Sex in this sense is perceived as a symbolic capital and performance where a “real man” can show off, achieve and literally or symbolically reproduce his masculinity.

Quite different appears the case in the gay scene of Skopje. Lambevski describes how hegemonic masculinity here is reproduced by the active inserters who are known as the ebachi (fuckers) in contrast to the passive insertee who are known as tetki (aunties) who are rather associated with feminity (Lembevski 1999:405). Interestingly, the masculine ebachi here are mainly performed
by working-class Moslem Albanians while the *tetki* are comprised mainly by Christian working- and middle class Macedonians (ibid.). With the “paradoxical class solidarity” between working class Albanian *ebachi* and working class Macedonian *tetki*, both groups produce a rigid gender division of what Lambevski calls 'tops' and 'bottoms' while both groups of men emphasise their superior gender and sexual capital. Yet, by assuming diametrically opposed positions off a privileged masculinity/activity and a subordinate femininity/passivity, they exclude mostly middle-class Macedonian gays who refuse to accept notions of rigid gender division in the gay scene of Skopje.

**Masculinity, women and nation**

Women, according to Dimova, play a crucial role in the maintenance of a pure Albanian culture (Dimova 2006: 308). To guarantee their women’s chastity, while proudly mentioning affairs with other ethnic groups, Albanian men stress the importance to keep their women away from other men and often also education. An explanation that have been given to Dimova by one of her male informants was that ”women are central to the reproduction of the Albanian lineage, and therefore their sexual practices have to be controlled” (ibid.). As it is outlined here, the preassumed function of women does not only include to preserve the culture but also to be responsible for the procreation and recreation of the Albanian lineage. Moreover, if we apply this concept to a national context it becomes evident – at least from a feminist theory or/and body politics point of view – that women’s bodies, as they are perceived as such, also serve the existence and maintenance of an immagined community (Anderson 1991) such as a nation state that is associated with honor and pride and patriotism. Embracing cultural and sexual capital, women become from the state’s (male) point of view the symbolic transmitters of the valued (female) nation, sustaining its genetic consistencies by giving life to the children of father state and mother nation – the national citizens. Being placed as the upholders of a nation, they also define boundaries between ethnicities. As Dimova points out, although women have a specific place in nationalist practices and discourses, this place is by any means defined by masculinist definitions of what is or what should be feminity (Dimova 2006: 315). As it has been often critizised by feminist anthropologist, women in the end are valued as icons for motherland and ethnic purity while they have to face innumerous restrictions as citizens and are used and abused for the sake of a unified nation of manhood (ibid.).
Masculinity, Class and Ethnicity

In his experiential queer study Lambevski describes in a self-reflexive manner how the notions of ethnicity change due to one's own position. Being in Macedonia, he perceives and assumes Albanians and signs of Albanicity different than he would, if he would see and meet Albanians in Sydney (Lambevski 1999:398f). Socially constructed norms such as being "a good Macedonian" which is linked to the notions of heterosexuality, homophobia and nationalism, seem to control even the mind of a metropolitan queer when he tries to approach an Albanian. Due to the social constructs that embrace ethnicity (in this case being Albanian), the desire for this respective Other becomes a physical threat to Lembevski's integrity (ibid.). So, what are the markers that set boundaries between different ethnicities having homosexual interrelations?

The queer ethnographer distinguishes three closely interrelated discursive regimes and sets of practices that reflect the relationship between Albanians and Macedonians (Lambevski 1999:406f). The first is the medical discourse that pathologizes homosexuality. Due to their lack of education and socio-economical situation, he argues, Albanians are excluded in contrast to homosexual middleclass Macedonians who become visible as homosexuals through their "scientific" knowledge. This means that while middleclass Macedonians usually identify themselves as homosexuals – including the pathological identifications that this knowledge brings with it – nine out of twelve of Lambevski’s working class Albanian informants do not consider themselves as homosexual or described this termination as one of being alien to them.

The second discursive regime according to Lambevski is popular homophobia that is reproduced by social sites such as family, media and the state apparatus (Althusser 1984) including school and the medical sector. Here the image of a man is feminized according to the assumption that homosexuals are sexually deviant by the fact that they get penetrated by others. In this popular discourse the homosexual "becomes a completely dehumanized object for the sexual satisfaction of the ‘real’ man" (Lambevski 1999:407) that even enjoys being raped by the latter. The queer scientist tries to exemplify that on macho men who rape tetki and the Macedonians police nonreactive attitude of ignorance towards such cases.

The third discursive regime is set up by the scene itself with its local and imported knowledges. Macedonian homosexuals are often in a far better economical situation, travel more to West and import pockets of Western gay culture to their country. This and their living situation allows them, in contrast to their Albanian counterparts, to live a life more disconnected from their
familial surveillance, to create and negotiate a more untraditional cultural identity. Working-class Macedonians are excluded of this form of gay culture and networks, and are perceived from the middle-class representants as lacking physical beauty, being to young and offering not enough cultural capital. In return this exclusion produces so many ressentiments on the side of the working-class homosexuals that they are not rarely happy to see getting middle-class Macedonians getting bashed by Albanian hustlers at the prominent ‘gay’ area in Skopje.

Conclusion

I hope that I made plausible that masculinity in heterosexual communities as well as in homosexuals ones is a highly constructed assumption, an idea, a sterotype, and an instrument that is sensitively responding to notions of class, nationalism, gender, preferences of sexuality, and ethnicity. Last but not least the reproduction of discourses of masculinity practiced by women themselves is a key factor in upholding this concept. Reaffirming and legitimizing notions of dominant systems such as nation-states and patriarchal systems, masculinity operates as a tool of joy for some and a tool of torture for others. However, as long as masculinity is surpressing and otherizing the ones of the other side of a gendered or ethnical boarder from an declared superiour position which in the case of the ‘gay’ community of Skopje does not allow its members to relate queer relationsshops between men as long as they don’t acknowledge the ‘tops’ and ‘bottoms’ it should be systematically questioned. As long as masculinity is seen isolated as an essential and natural phenemenon of our societies that is not linked and deconstructed in accordance to similar systems of dominance, including imperialism, colonialism, statehood and warfare that try to establish a hegemony for the price of excluding others, mental and physical boarders will not only persist but increase.
References


