

Generations of Activism and Queer Time

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Jon Binnie & Christian Klesse, [The Politics of Age, Temporality and Intergenerationality in Transnational Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Activist Networks](#), 47 **Soc.** 580 (2013).

In their engaging, highly readable article, [Jon Binnie](#) and [Christian Klesse](#) explore the effects of intergenerationality within Polish transnational sexual solidarity movements. Specifically, the authors examine how chronological age and people's histories and trajectories of political activism shape the interactions taking place between lesbian and gay activists from Poland and those from Western Europe.

The authors locate their discussion within queer conversations about time and futurity. According to Lee Edelman, whose [blistering critique of heterosexual reproductive futurity](#) proved very popular within certain quarters of queer studies, "The image of the Child invariably shapes the logic within which the political itself must be thought"; there is only one position to take when it comes to the Child and that is to be "for" it. Edelman argues instead for an "unthinkable" politics that refuses to be oriented to the future and its beneficiaries. But this is not the position Binnie and Klesse adopt. Rejecting Edelman's account of queer, the authors draw instead on José Esteban Muñoz's [argument of queer time](#), where "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond . . . the present." Thus, the authors indicate the possibility of a "queer child" as one who stands in for, and gestures to, a different future—where sexual diversity is a regular and accepted dimension of social life.

At the heart of Binnie and Klesse's article is a discussion of trans-generational gay solidarity politics drawn from participant observation and interviews—carried out since 2004—with thirty-five activists involved in Polish LGBTQ political networks. One of the striking features of their discussion is the age difference between Polish activists and those acting in solidarity from elsewhere in Europe. While the Polish activists tend to be young lesbian women in their early to mid-twenties, the gay activists from elsewhere—who join their marches and offer alliance—are frequently older men. The article explores perceptions on both sides of these age and gender transactions, including of their benefits and tensions. The authors quote a young Polish woman who describes the lack of older lesbian and gay role models in Poland; to her, one value in having older activists from elsewhere participate in marches lies in the sense of continuity and future that is provided—with its hope that the rocky, often violent times of gay activism can be survived and, at a certain point, may perhaps be left behind. At the same time, the young Polish activist quoted alludes to the problem of outside assumptions of expertise: particularly when older men from Western Europe tell young, Polish feminists how to do politics.

Problems of patronage emerge strongly in this account, with Polish queer activists being seen, in a kind of racialising gesture, as the "poor children." Binnie and Klesse allude to the familiar West European and North American paradigm in which sexual politics is approached through a linear narrative of development. From this perspective, East Europe, along with many other parts of the world, remains "behind" when it comes to sexuality equality or liberation—a timing problem that can and needs to be remedied through accelerated "catch up" measures. Yet, this version of political time is challenged by their Polish interviewees. It is also challenged by academic work that—anchored in the historical experience of Central and Eastern Europe—approaches time differently. There are the queer nostalgias emerging from regions such as the former Yugoslavia, and the forms of ["knotted time"](#) Robert Kulpa

and Joanna Mizielińska discuss, which involve temporal disjunctions and time's unsettled representation.

The confluence of different temporalities is important for thinking about the effects of generation on political identities, knowledge, and projects. Ken Plummer, whom the authors quote, makes the nice point that [“all sexualities dangle from an age perspective.”](#) How we live our sexual identities is shaped both by our age and by our generation's distinctive experiences, including earlier, formative political moments. Binnie and Klesse quote a Dutch gay activist who suggests that because Polish queer organisations are more recently established, they can integrate the different strands of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender politics in a far more foundational manner than much older gay organisations, such as the Dutch COC, where newer movements sit precariously upon a foundationally gay and lesbian base. The Dutch COC was founded in 1946; Polish LGBTQ politics became visible, the authors suggest, in 2001 with the first march for LGBTQ rights in Warsaw and then hit a “turning point” in 2004, with the March for Tolerance in Krakow. The violent far-right counter-demonstrations that met the Krakow march helped turn LGBTQ politics into a focus for Polish national debate.

There is a growing body of work on sexual dissidence and LGBT politics in Poland from academics such as Agnieszka Graff, Anna Gruszczynska, and Joanna Mizielińska, and Binnie and Klesse's article on trans-generational activism is one of several pieces these authors have written on Polish LGBT activism and politics. While the interest and relevance of this particular piece certainly comes from its geopolitical context, it comes also from the importance of thinking about the power and resources age, generation, and gender differentially provide in relation to political activism. Binnie and Klesse are attuned to the ways inequalities intersect; the authors allude to the paradigm of intersectionality and, in other articles on Polish LGBT activism, have focused on different inequalities, [including class](#).

However, for me, what emerges in this article more strongly than a sociological account of how age and gender shape political activism is the significance of life histories, generational cohorts, and the formative experience of “coming out” activism to how subjects understand and feel their politics. This is an important theme, salient to many contexts where cross-generational political differences give rise to conflict and strain. Sometimes tensions between activists (whose politics got forged through different eras of struggle) surface directly but often they emerge in other ways: in the anger that erupts when issues deemed burning for one generation seem to be disregarded by another; in the incomprehension expressed towards previously (or subsequently) taken-for-granted beliefs and premises; or in the political datedness or aesthetic response that greets terms and ways of thinking perceived as outmoded or overly *avant-garde*. In this context, Binnie and Klesse's article evocatively demonstrates the value of a more attentive and sensitive awareness of the generational ways in which political knowledges are formed, and of the possibilities and challenges for connecting across these differences.

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