

Sexual Dis(orientation), Globalization, and the *Spartacus* Guide to International Travel

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The world is now a ‘global village’, to coin Marshall McLuhan’s term. We live in an age of mass migration, rapid telecommunications and inter-cultural exchange. It is common these days to cross borders speedily. Whereas international travel was once the preserve of the wealthy or at least the middle classes, this is no longer the case – in Europe at least. As Briand Bedford, Chief Editor of the *Spartacus International Gay Guide* says:

We live in an exciting world! Discounted airfares in many countries make travel both affordable and easy. The expansion of the European Union opens doors to discovery in countries which were difficult to visit just a few years ago. The gay scene in many of these countries is in its early stages, making it all the more interesting.¹

The question I pursue in this paper is: What does it mean to be gay in a globalized world? I’ll begin by relating a personal experience.

I am often excited by movement, of crossing countries and continents, even if it comes with the prospect of disorientation – that sudden anxious moment of displacement. I know the feeling of dislocation, of culture shock, having lived on three continents: I grew up in Africa, studied in North America, and now I live in Europe. A sense of disorientation, I have discovered - alienation even - can be quite acute if one is gay and alone. There’s a double estrangement that comes with

being not only foreign but also queer; and the challenge is how quickly to adapt, to get one's bearings.

I found this to be the case when, this summer, I set off from London, alone, with a backpack, a *Lonely Planet Guide*, and an interrail pass, to explore Eastern and Central Europe. During my travels, I would experience a thrilling unfamiliarity with my surroundings, which I would relish until, to my dismay, the ubiquitous golden arches of McDonalds sprung out from quaint streets and ruined my romanticized image of an unspoilt Eastern Europe. In Prague, in fact, I found the Museum of Communism squashed between McDonalds and the Casino – and its location advertised as such. With deliberate irony, it seemed, the Czechs were announcing they had no nostalgia for their communist past. As I travelled on to Poland and Hungary, I discovered a similar disdain for the socialist era and a mad clamour to reach for the promises of a neoliberal global capitalist economy.

Globalization and the Modern Experience

This is perhaps an unstoppable trend – a sign of the times. 'Modernity is inherently globalizing', says Anthony Giddens.² Arjun Appadurai adds, 'The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models...'³ In current globalization theory, 'the world is being reconstituted as a single social space,' says Timothy Brennan:

One might interpret this to mean that the world is becoming more homogenized, that we are seeing the creation of a single, albeit hybridized, world culture whose pace of life, tastes and customs – conditioned by a similar regime of commodities... of cars, computers, and cellular phones – has increasingly fewer variations.⁴

However, Brennan posits another view, which is that ‘[m]ost of the features said to characterize globalization are American, and they are coercively imposed on others as a universal norm.’⁵ To his mind, ‘Globalization is therefore not a description but a projection; or more properly it is a projection that passes itself off as a description.’⁶

I don’t know whether I agree completely with either the proponents of globalization theory or those challenging it. But Benedict Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, extended by Arjun Appadurai to include ‘imagined worlds’, ‘the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons or groups around the globe’⁷, proves useful, I believe, in envisaging a transnational gay community.

As Anderson puts it, a nation ‘is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,’⁸ and ‘regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.’⁹

There is no actual Queer Nation, though the concept has been mooted, and we have had an activist group by that name.¹⁰

Instead we have what might be called ‘the Gay International’ – a network of global campaigners and lobbyists, working for rights and freedoms, based mostly in the West. We have organisations, which may be considered ‘embassies’, internationally representative bodies - ILGA (the International Lesbian and Gay Association) or IGLHRC (the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission) for example. Unifying the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/Queer (LGBTQ) world is the iconic rainbow flag, a powerful symbol of unity in diversity (which may also be seen, though, as covering a multitude of inequalities).

The Internet

The establishment of a global gay community has happened only in recent times and has been no easy feat. It relies on common points of identification such as sexual orientation, of course, and worldwide struggles against homophobia and discrimination. The internet has played a pivotal role in international gay rights activism, not to mention the pursuit of gay friendships and sexual relations. On Gaydar, Manhunt, GayRomeo or any number of sites, one can very quickly make contact with other gay or bisexual men, either locally or internationally.

I discovered, before travelling to Eastern Europe, a simple search on the internet could produce a list of gay venues, from accommodation to cafes, cruising grounds, sex clubs, leather bars, and discoteques. At the more high-brow end there is information on LGBT rights, film festivals and other queer cultural events. In fact the internet – in many respects the most

interactive, democratic, inclusive media form - has done and continues to do much, to promote the idea of a global gay community.¹¹

In Prague, Krakow and Budapest, after a day or more of getting my bearings, I eventually found the local gay scene with some help from the internet, though I discovered doing gay searches in internet cafes could raise a few eyebrows; and it takes a certain boldness of attitude to persevere! There are easier ways to make these connections, I later found.

Halfway through my travels, when browsing in a gay bookshop, in Berggasse, Vienna, just up the road from Sigmund Freud's old residence, I re-discovered the *Spartacus International Gay Guide*. In contemplative mind, I realised the last *Spartacus* I'd bought had been at least ten years ago; and it now beckoned to me: '[E]very gay man knows it, uses it and needs it,' says the *Spartacus* website: there are '1300 pages of in-depth information about more than 160 different countries'.¹² I wondered why, when I bought the *Lonely Planet Guide* and a European phrase book in London, I hadn't thought to get *Spartacus* as well.

My discovery – my admission, in fact - was that my sexual orientation, my gayness, was really more important to my sense of identity than I had imagined, so a gay guide, if I really thought about it, was probably just as necessary on a journey such as this as the *Lonely Planet Guide* - which only partly showed me where I wanted to go. In short, when I arrived at a train station in an unknown city, I'd try to get my bearings with a streetmap, I'd locate my accommodation, then I'd change currencies if necessary, find somewhere to eat, see the sights

and talk to other travellers, or the locals if I could. But in the end, I wanted also to see a gay map of the city, to discover the bars, clubs, and cruising spots, to make contact with my kin, as it were.

Part of orienting myself in a new city, I had to admit, was discovering where the other gay people, particularly gay men, met. If I managed to do that, to have a drink in a gay bar, to stroll through a cruising ground, even if I didn't talk to anyone, it was as though I'd managed to map myself, somehow, onto the strange city – showed myself where I might belong in it. And I realised the experience could be the same, wherever I travelled in the world, virtually.

Reflections on *Spartacus*

So *Spartacus*, for me, assumed and unexpected significance and provoked much reflection. As a gay male reader, I felt engrossed and interpellated, yet also critical about its problematic elements. To give an overview of its purpose and content: *Spartacus* encourages responsible gay citizenship and sexual health, at the same time as offering gay men a passport to the gay world. The Chief Editor, Briand Bedford says in his introduction,

I recommend you support positive developments in the new member countries of the European Union. Take a trip to our neighbouring countries and discover the rich culture, the fantastic cuisine and the friendly people. Take responsibility for yourself and others: don't only remember to take condoms

with you but use them too!... Discover the gay world and find your way around with the help of your new SPARTACUS International Gay Guide¹³

Published in Berlin, the book is written in five European languages - English, German, French, Spanish and Italian – and it has distributors in Western Europe, Australia, Japan, Russia, and North America. At the beginning there is a Health Information section on HIV and STDs, then a list of supportive international organisations. At the end, there are world maps showing time zones and the legal situation of male homosexuality.

The 160 countries appear in the format of Name, Location, Initials, Time Zone, International Country code, International Access code, Language, Area, Population, Capital, Religions, Climate, and Important Gay Cities. A brief introduction to each country gives a history of LGBT rights, legal status, the age of consent, and other interesting commentary.

Under Austria, for example, we learn that ‘2002 saw the abolishment of the last anti-homosexual law...The age of consent was set at 14 for all.’¹⁴ Under Vienna, we see adverts for saunas, sex clubs, cinemas, escort services, hotels, etc. and learn that:

Due to the low cost airlines which fly to Vienna, the city has become an attractive destination for an affordable weekend or short trip. Gay activities in Vienna range from nude swimming on the Donau Island to the fetish event in Wien in Schwarz each October.¹⁵

Salzburg is less well-served by gay venues, though the best place to cruise, apparently, is the ‘Mirrabellgarten (after sunset around the ‘Rosenhügel’)¹⁶ The Mirrabell Gardens are of course not far from this conference venue, but one may need a scarf and mittens when cruising in winter!

There are numerous full-colour adverts throughout *Spartacus* – for accommodation, saunas, clubs, sex shops, and safer sex information; and it is true that most are homoerotic – but that surely is to be expected. Fit young Caucasian men are predominantly, though not always, the models; and *Spartacus* could easily be criticized as Eurocentric, white, middle-class, male and sex-centred, but I think its significance goes beyond these obvious criticisms.

Though it is full of adverts, *Spartacus* sometimes voices a note of criticism about excessively commercialized gay scenes. Of the Czech Republic, *Spartacus* says, ‘Czech society is liberal and open minded’ but, ‘Surprisingly, in Prague, which has an extensive commercial gay life there was never a Gay Pride event’.¹⁷ A more responsible and proud form of gay citizenship, it seems, is encouraged by the *Spartacus* narrative.

For Prague or Budapest, major gay destinations, there is a gay map of the city centre, general gay information and tourist information, followed by extensive listings of Bars, Men’s Clubs, Cafes, Dance Clubs, Restaurants, Sex shops/Movies, Escorts, Saunas/Baths, Leather and Fetish, Guest Houses, Apartments, Private Accommodation, General Groups, Health Groups, Swimming, and Cruising spots. Although the

information is aimed primarily at tourists, it may also prove useful to gay men moving and resettling.

Occasionally the commentary verges on the comical. An enthusiastic thumbs-up for Spain as a gay destination, is tempered with the stern warning that,

Even if he's laid back himself, a Spaniard thinks of his countrymen as very conservative, and above all he demands discretion in his own back yard. That famous Spanish passion has to be carefully unleashed behind closed doors.¹⁸

National stereotyping of this sort often characterizes *Spartacus's* commentary on cultural difference.

There are smaller sections for countries with a less well-developed gay scene or no gay scene at all; and here the commentary differs again. The short section on Syria, for example, says,

Syrians are friendly and helpful people, even if at a first glance they may appear somewhat reserved. As the country has not yet been introduced to mass tourism, there is no real interest in profiteering from travellers. There is no gay scene, but there are a few places where men wanting to have sex with other men can meet up, but it is not as direct as in other Arab or North African countries. If you want to make contact with guys in Syria, you have to get in with the local people. Men who you meet in the places given here are rarely interested in money, and are genuinely hospitable.¹⁹

Again, although it is largely driven by commercial interests, *Spartacus* nevertheless shows a capacity to acknowledge a life and culture of same-sex relations outside the predominant Western paradigm. I read this as an attempt to promote cross-cultural communication, rather than simply promote sexual tourism, though I can see the argument that the collection of knowledge in this manner, from the non-Western world, may constitute a problematic orientalist exercise.

Despite its globalized focus, *Spartacus* does consider local communities and structures. In fact, in the case of Zimbabwe, not an obvious gay holiday destination, there is nevertheless an attempt to provide information about local LGBT counselling and legal services, and GALZ (Gays and Lesbians of Zimbabwe), which provides a 'Safe haven for gays and lesbians to meet and socialise in comfort'.²⁰

Conclusions

There is an emphasis in *Spartacus*, obviously aimed at gay men rather than lesbians, on the sexual aspect of gay male life. The attraction of men to other men is celebrated as a universal marker of gay male identity; and it is implied that this is the underlying purpose of gay travel – to 'discover' other gay men.

In a sense this is nothing new. The advent of globalization, travel and migration simply extends and accelerates a process that took place in the early to mid-twentieth century. In his classic essay 'Capitalism and Gay Identity', John D'Emilio argues that 'Capitalism has created the

material conditions for homosexual desire to express itself as a central component of some individual's lives...'²¹ In the West, it freed individuals from tight family bonds, promoted travel, and facilitated new connections. The transnational gay community, constructed comparatively recently, seems bonded by a desire for same-sex solidarity beyond national, social, and linguistic boundaries.

One could argue this is biased towards the experience of Westerners and *Spartacus* is guilty of cultural imperialism – of promoting sexual adventure from rich First World countries to poorer places. One could criticise gay tourism on a number of counts. But *Spartacus*, it seems to me, is nevertheless an invaluable source of information; and it cannot easily be disregarded as only serving the interests of a certain class of men.

We may not all buy into the same idea of what constitutes a global gay identity and, in time, the very concept of a gay identity may collapse altogether. As gay activist Peter Tatchell optimistically says,

In a future, more enlightened epoch, homophobia will be vanquished... In this cultural context, the differences between hetero and homo will lose their significance... No one will care who is gay or heterosexual. The boundaries between hetero and homo will merge and blur, with a greater incidence of bisexuality... Most people will stop defining themselves as straight or gay, and the gender of a person's sexual partner will cease to determine the

social validity (or illegitimacy) of their carnal and affectional feelings.²²

Until that time, however, which I suspect is a long way off, *Spartacus* will continue to orientate hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of gay men on their travels.

NOTES

¹ Briand Bedford (ed.), *Spartacus International Gay Guide*, 36th Edition, Bruno Gmuder Verlag GMBH, Berlin, 2007, p. Iv.

² A Giddens, 'From *The Consequences of Modernity*', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London, 1994, p.181.

³ A Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London, 1994, p. 328.

⁴ T Brennan, 'From development to globalization: postcolonial studies and globalization theory', in Neil Lazarus (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, p. 123.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 127.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 128.

⁷ *Op. Cit.*, p. 329.

⁸ B Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, New York, 1991, p. 6.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Queer Nation, an organisation founded in New York in March, 1990, aimed to eliminate homophobia and increase queer visibility. Their slogan, 'We're here. We're Queer. Get used to it' is by now legendary.

¹¹ Print media, the internet's predecessor, has of course also played a pivotal role in forging a sense of community. Newspapers and magazines, often distributed free at gay venues, tend to promote the idea of queer comradeship and commonality on the basis of sexual orientation.

¹² Spartacus International Gay Guide website, viewed on 20 October, 2007, <<http://www.spartacusworld.com/gayguide>>.

¹³ Op. Cit., p. iv.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 49

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 803.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 960.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1211.

²¹ J D'Emilio, 'Capitalism and Gay Identity,' in Donald Morton (ed), *The Material Queer*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado and Oxford, England, 1996, p. 269.

²²P Tatchell, quoted in 'Comment: Gay and lesbian identity is doomed', in Pinknews.co.uk, 29 November 2006, viewed on 20 October, 2007, <<http://www.pinknews.co.uk/news/opinion/2005-3123.html>>

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