Biopolitical mythologies: Róheim, Freud, (homo)phobia, and the sexual science of Eastern European Otherness

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Abstract
A vast body of research has, following Foucault, shown the scientific study of sexuality to be central to the construction of modernity and its Others, and to biopolitical categories of personhood and citizenship. Similarly, much historical work has acknowledged the critical role of the Eastern European Other in imagining the modern European West. Yet while representations of sexuality were critical to Eastern Europe’s invention, and have been increasingly visible elements of re-emerging European “neo-orientalisms,” there has been little scholarly concern with how such symbolic and political hierarchies were constructed through the historical intersections of ethnographic and sexual scientific practice, or with this history’s biopolitical implications. This paper examines the intersection of several such sexual-scientific imaginings. Focusing on the conjuncture between Hungarian scholar Géza Róheim’s psychoanalytic interpretations of European folklore and non-European ethnography, Sigmund Freud’s orientalizing construction of the key psychoanalytic concept of “phobia,” and scholarly analyses of postsocialist sexual politics, I argue that these intersecting scientific works joined evolutionist understandings of culture to theories of universal psychic development to read Eastern Europe as a site of psycho-sexual and civilizational immaturity, producing mutually-reinforcing narratives that fabricated Eastern European sexuality as a biopolitical marker of European difference. These overlapping sexual geotemporalities, I suggest, continue to inform current scholarly interpretations of postsocialist homophobia, (re)producing both Hungary and Eastern Europe as naturalized sites of homophobia, primitivity, and failed sexual citizenship, and rendering hegemonic the status of the region and its inhabitants as sexual Others of “European” modernity. By fabricating postsocialist homophobia as a scientific “fact,” such layered discourses sustain the biopolitical boundaries of modern European citizenship.

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The only pure myth is the idea of a science devoid of all myth.
(Serres, 1974, cited in Latour, 1993: 93)

Since 1989 numerous scholars, drawing on postcolonial studies, have noted the re-emergence of what have been called “postsocialist neo-orientalisms” (Bakić-Hayden, 1995; Buchowski, 2006; Melegh, 2006; Todorova, 1997; Wolff, 1994). These discourses have had powerful effects, constructing post-Cold War Europe anew as a timescape symbolically divided into a “modern,” “civilized” West and a “backward,” “uncivilized” East, and (re)establishing a “topos of West European moral superiority” (Böröcz, 2006: 112). As Burgess (1997) has noted, they have also constructed East Europe as a space of myth and memory: the land of Europe’s problematic past; the place where the repressed returns; the home of modernity’s precarious and perilous Other.

More recently, within the last decade, violent attacks on LGBT marches throughout Eastern Europe have drawn worldwide attention to the problem of postsocialist homophobia, contributing to its emergence as a particularly salient site for interpreting both postsocialism and the region: symptomatic of much deeper problems of “transition,” and emblematic of postsocialist societies’ relationships to key categories of modern European belonging such as inclusion, diversity, and tolerance (Graff, 2006; Kuhar, 2013; O’Dwyer and Schwartz, 2010; Renkin, 2007, 2009).1

Yet while there has been growing scholarly attention in recent years to the orientalizing character of dominant discourses of postsocialist homophobia, and their political effects, recognizing that these emerge from and embody tensions of intersecting national and transnational sexual identities and politics (Baer, 2009; Kulpa, 2013; Owczarzak, 2009; Renkin, 2009; Woodcock, 2011), it has largely been ignored that they are also problems of science, and its historical relationship to sexuality and the geotemporal politics of knowledge.2 As Larry Wolff (1994) has shown, however, sex and sexuality have been central elements in scholarly and scientific imaginings of Eastern European difference since the Enlightenment, in ways critical to the marking of civilizational borders between Europe’s East and West, their inhabitants, and their capacities for proper personhood and citizenship. Homophobia itself is, of course, a profoundly sexual-scientific concept, rooted in medicalized concepts of “phobia,” and intimately linked to other key categories of modern sexology like “homosexuality” and “heterosexuality” (Murray, 2009; Wickberg, 2000). As we shall see, it is also an idea deeply embedded in scientific
geotemporalities of both societies and selves and, most importantly, their deviance and failure. Furthermore, postsocialist neo-orientalisms including their readings of sexualities and sexual politics, are themselves the products not merely of popular, political, and economic discourses, but of a wide range of social scientific knowledge – part of the vast proliferation of civil society analysis and policy critically shaping understandings of postsocialist problems and solutions since 1989 (Ghodsee, 2004; Melegh, 2006). Discourses of postsocialist homophobia depend profoundly on these intersecting scientific histories, and the boundaries they draw between European regions, citizens, and societies. They are thus critical sites for the ongoing work of modern biopower, (re)constituting postsocialist Eastern Europe as a powerfully naturalized site of ambiguous spatial and temporal belonging, of precarious Europeanness and modernity.

In this article, I examine several intersecting historical sexual-scientific imaginings: the conjuncture between the work of early to mid-20th-century Hungarian folklorist, ethnographer, and psychoanalyst Géza Róheim, who brought together European (and especially Hungarian and Eastern European) folklore, non-European ethnography, and psychoanalytic theory in order to analyze the hidden sexual meanings of folktales, myths, and customs; Sigmund Freud’s incorporation of Eurocentric geographic-civilizational assumptions into his construction of the key psychoanalytic concept of “phobia” – central to the later concept of “homophobia”; and scientific-scholarly discourses of postsocialist sexual politics. Critical science studies scholars such as Donna Haraway (1989) and Bruno Latour (1987, 1993, 2011) have argued that scientific “facts” cannot be distinguished from the process of their fabrication, a fabrication always resulting from, yet obscured and naturalized by, corroborative and confirming reinforcement. I argue that Róheim’s work, by bringing both Freud’s modern, medicalized science of sex and modern anthropological science to bear on Hungarian and Eastern European folk culture, mapped their sexual-psychological and civilizational hierarchies onto already existing geographies and temporalities of human difference, reinforcing their overlapping boundaries. These intersecting and mutually confirming scientific narratives of geographic, sexual, and social-evolutionary difference, I claim, functioned to fabricate Hungarian and Eastern European sexuality as a naturalized, “factual” marker, a “black box” (Latour, 1987, 1993) of problematic European difference, with critical implications for the meanings of postsocialist homophobia. Thanks to their scientific entanglements, Róheim’s mappings of Eastern European “pervasive geographies” (Bleys, 1995) remain deeply relevant today. Not only do they haunt popular and political discourses of postsocialist homophobia, saturating them with deeply-rooted, naturalized meanings and boundaries, they also continue to inform their present scientific constructions, undergirding the ongoing production of both Hungary and Eastern Europe as particular sites of homophobia, rendering hegemonic the status of the region and its inhabitants as persistent sexual Others of “European” modernity, and sustaining the boundaries of modern European belonging. Unpacking the complexly intersecting histories of the black box of Eastern European sexual difference, I suggest,
can help us perceive more clearly postsocialist homophobia’s deeply biopolitical meanings, and thus enables us to think more effectively about what “homophobia” itself is and does.

**Science fiction/social fact**

Researchers of European orientalisms past and present have focused considerable attention on the symbolic power of scholarly discourses and narratives (Melegh, 2006; Todorova, 1997; Wolff, 1994). Yet they have failed to consider fully the effects of such narratives as specifically scientific discourses.

Critical analysts of science have long challenged understandings of science as an objective domain of transparent natural truths, arguing that scientific “truths” are cultural and political constructions. In this view, science functions through the creation of narratives that make politically inflected, and politically productive, truth-claims. As Donna Haraway has famously noted, such narratives are “fictions” like any other; it is only when scientific assertions achieve discursive dominance that the material process of their construction is obscured, and they become “facts” (Haraway, 1989). Similarly, Bruno Latour (1987, 1993) has argued that it is only through the practical interrelationships of the scientific laboratory and other institutional sites that moments of conjecture, hypothesis, and experiment are transformed, in complex processes of narration, repetition, and confirmation — “fabrication” — into prior and inevitable truths: “facts.” Fact-making is thus a contingent and collective process which masks its own constructed origins: Latour suggests that once something is confirmed by enough people as fact, it becomes a “black box” — an unquestioned “truth” whose naturalness can ground further truth claims (Latour, 1987, 1993).

These interpretations build upon Durkheim’s concept of “social fact” (Durkheim, 1966 [1895]) to posit the scientific production of knowledge as having material effects: imagined and enacted as if real, and thus real in its consequences; establishing social and political boundaries of apparently natural, a priori existence. Science thus shapes relations of power and meaning in more subtle ways than overtly politicized discourses, rendering them hegemonic in character (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Haraway, 1989; Latour, 1993; Schiebinger, [1993] 2006); indeed, it is this process of social-scientific transformation through which modern biopower constitutes “regimes of truth” linking and dividing bodies and populations, selves and states (Foucault, 1978, 1991).

Following Foucault’s realization that modern biopower has depended significantly on its deployment in relation to specifically “sexual” beliefs and practices, scholars such as Rudi Bleys (1995), and Harry Oosterhuis (2000) have focused attention on sexuality’s critical role in a diverse range of scientific truth and boundary making practices. Building upon these perspectives, I explore how Röheim’s and Freud’s intersecting sexual-geotemporal narratives exemplified the scientific knowledge production through which non-European spaces — including
Eastern European spaces like Hungary – were “black-boxed” as sites of sexual-civilizational difference, and constituted as modern Europe’s essential Others.

Róheim and the making of “biopolitical mythology”

Culture in a sense is a fairy tale come true.

(Róheim, 1940: 251)

Born in 1891 in Budapest to a wealthy Jewish family, Géza Róheim acquired early an intense interest in both folklore and mythology, and ethnography and social theory, reading Frazer, but also Tylor, Darwin, and Spencer (Dundes, 1992: ix–x). Initially a rather traditional early 20th-century Hungarian folklorist – his first article, on myths of dragons and dragon-slaying heroes (Róheim, 1911), conformed closely to then-dominant theories of sun-symbolism (Dundes, 1992) – whilst working on graduate work in Germany during the First World War Róheim encountered Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories (Dundes, 1992; Verebélyi, 1977). Inspired, he quickly developed a hybrid theoretical lens that, in accordance with national ethnographic traditions, saw folktales and myths as revealing the origins of and connections between customs, cultures, and peoples, but that also, following Freud, took them to reveal the primordial sexual-psychic structures at the heart of all human existence.

Although most obviously indebted to Freudian theories, Róheim’s scholarship was deeply embedded in a long tradition of Enlightenment and counter-Enlightenment scientific debate about the significance of human difference for understanding human nature and society, which included both the universalism of Adolf Bastian’s fundamental “psychic unity of mankind” and the more particularist cultural specificities of Humboldtian “Nationalcharakter” and the “Volkgeist” of Lazarus’s Völkerpsychologie (Bunzl, 1996). Róheim was also rooted, however, in a more specific scholarly history, which strove to define the relationship of Eastern Europeans to Europe and the rest of the world. Going back in Hungary to (at least) the work of 18th-century writers such as Mátyás Bél and Sámuel Tessedík, these debates, which developed in response to those then current among Western philosophes about Eastern Europe’s relationship to the West (Wolf, 1994), included questions of physical and racial, as well as linguistic and cultural, difference – and often focused on the perceived backwardness of countries like Hungary relative to the West (Gal, 1991; Sozan, 1977; Turda, 2004). By no means homogenous, these discourses nonetheless framed Eastern Europe as a particular region bound together by varying characteristics, yet similar conditions and problems, distinguishing them from the West (Wolf, 1994).

Yet Róheim’s perspective, like Freud’s own theories, also arose in response to the 19th-century emergence of the new “human sciences.” This was a crucial time for anthropological, ethnological, and other efforts to understand scientifically the relationships between culture, geography, and biology: to discover the similarities
and differences between peoples and places, classify their different traits in relation
to categories of savagery and civilization, and delineate the internal and external
boundaries of modern humanity (Blanckaert, 1988; Bunzl, 1996; Stocking, 1996;
Zammito, 2002). Most visibly focused on the significance of exotic non-European
Others, these projects also reflected profound concerns, both Western and Eastern
European, for differences within Europe – concerns often framed explicitly in relation
to scientific knowledge about extra-European difference (Blanckaert, 1988;
Lafferton, 2007; Turda, 2004).

While race, nation, language, and religion are the usual categories in relation to
which these discourses and practices of scientific distinction are discussed, sexuality
was a key criterion according to which they were organized both beyond and within
the borders of “Europe.” This was also a critical moment for sexual science: for the
development and scientific legitimacy of disciplines like sexology and psychology,
as well as for the credibility of their efforts to assert the importance of sexuality in
mapping clear lines between normality and abnormality, and the borders distin-
guishing both “Europeanness” and “non-Europeanness,” and “modernity” and
“tradition” (Bleys, 1995; Foucault, 1978; Oosterhuis, 2000; Somerville, 1997;

Róheim’s work thus marks a particularly rich conjunction of a range of modern
scientific concerns and perspectives. Fundamentally Freudian in character, in his
analysis folktales and customs consistently revealed the sexual-psychic tensions at
the center of folk life, culture, and society. In one of his classic texts, on Hungarian
witchcraft and magic, for example, he argued that both are fundamentally similar
to Freudian Symptomhandlung (neurotically symptomatic acts), responses to com-
combined desires for and fear of sexual intercourse (Róheim, 1925). Similarly, he traced
the origins of the Europe-wide folk narrative of the “Tuesday Woman,” (1913a) a
frightening hag who appeared to women who disobeyed taboos against working on
certain days, to dreams representing superego conflicts over sexual desires and fears
(Róheim, 1992 [1946]).

Róheim, however, moved beyond the disciplinary traditions of European folk-
lore studies, utilizing data from anthropological and comparative cultural studies.
In his early analysis of the Hungarian Táltos, or shaman, for example, Róheim
traced the folkloric remnants of Hungarian shamanism, grounding his analysis
conventionally in Hungarian and Finno-Ugric folk customs. But he also invoked
non-European ethnography to argue that Hungarians and “other primitive peo-
ples” (such as North American Indians and Africans) shared a global shamanic
tradition (Róheim, 1912: 361). In his later Freudian writings, however, he inter-
preted the shaman’s ritual and social role as structured primarily by sadistic sexu-
ality and symbolic castration, though still global in character (1925, 1951). Thus,
ultimately, sexuality and psycho-sexual development explained not only the exist-
ence and meaning of folk customs themselves, but the origin and nature of the
people to whom they belonged, and the fundamental connections between customs
and peoples. In subsequent work Róheim further expanded the boundaries of both
folk ethnography and psychoanalysis, conducting his own fieldwork, tracing the
origin of myths in places like Arnhem Land (1951) and New Guinea (1948) to the sexually-fraught dreams of individuals, enriching his analysis of shamanism’s sexual roots with his own data from Australia and North America (1951), and finding the keys to North American Trickster mythology in the id’s hidden domination in primitive societies (1949). Róheim’s work was thus both methodologically and theoretically far-ranging: linking together a wide range of peoples, from native Australians to American Indians to Hungarian peasants, to explain the meaning and significance of human cultural and psychological processes.5

A consequence of Róheim’s commitment to both Bastian’s “psychic unity of mankind” and Freudian theories of universal psycho-sexual processes, this notoriously indiscriminate method (Dundes, 1992; Sozan, 1977) had far-reaching implications for the boundaries he drew between people, cultures, and regions. For although he used folklore and ethnography from all over the world in his writings, Róheim’s analyses of psycho-sexual symbolism depended critically for their central insights on his reading of specific, detailed examples from Hungarian and other East European folklore, frequently combined with non-European ethnographic data, to explain the universal origins and meanings of myths. Thus, in demonstrating the psycho-sexual origins of all folk belief in magic, Róheim unraveled the dynamics of the neurotic sexual symptoms of specifically Hungarian witchcraft to reveal such beliefs’ deepest roots. Similarly, in his analysis of the tale of the “Tuesday Woman,” after noting the tale’s broader European distribution (and its variations, such as the “Wednesday Woman”), he stressed that “before we go on to discuss the latent meaning of the story... we shall have to give some data on the historical background and inter-relatedness of these Tuesday Women and Wednesday Women in the folk-lore of Eastern Europe” (Róheim, 1992 [1946]: 47) – then focusing on the Hungarian “Kedd Asszony” [Tuesday Woman], supported by Romanian, Russian, Galician, and other Eastern European variants (and a few additional examples from Western Europe) as the psychoanalytic keys to the underlying sexual meanings of all such tales, and their universal roles in expressing fears of menstruation and masturbation, and enforcing taboos on excessive sexual intercourse.6

Róheim’s critical expansion of this technique – and one which characterized much of his work – can be seen in his investigation of the origin and meanings of global shamanic tradition. It was through tracing the remnants of Hungarian shamanic tradition to their Finno-Ugric cultural roots that Róheim uncovered the fundamental psycho-sexual truths of sadism and castration anxiety at the heart of shamanism. He thus, in effect, made Hungarian and other Eastern European folklore privileged windows into the foundational psycho-sexual meanings of folk culture as a whole.7 Yet in defining shamanism as global, he strongly connected Hungarian and Eastern European shamanic beliefs and practices and his own data on North American and Australian shamanism. This fusing of cultural examples, in fact, frequently served Róheim as a primary tool for depicting the universal processes and meanings common to all folk beliefs and customs, and the primitive sexual psyche’s place at the root of all human culture.
Thus, while he included Western European folk and folklore in his examples, Róheim’s analytical technique made them subsidiary to the joint status of Hungarians, Eastern Europeans, and non-Europeans as primary exemplars of the human psyche’s fundamental desires and processes. The effect of Róheim’s “indiscriminate” method was therefore significant, and dual: functioning to render Hungarian and Eastern European people and non-European “primitive” cultures ethnologically and psychologically equivalent – coeval – while at the same time denying their coevalness with the people and cultures of the modern European West (Fabian, 2002 [1983]).

This denial was critical because, like many of the major figures of 19th-century folklore, anthropology, and psychology he drew on – and their early 20th-century heirs, including Freud – Róheim was a profoundly evolutionist thinker. “Convinced of the unparalleled significance of sex both in the individual psyche and in the evolution of civilization” (Robinson, 1969: 4), in his view, individual psychic development and social evolution followed essentially the same paths. For Róheim, as for Freud, sex was the key to this congruence, revealing individual psychic processes, universal social-evolutionary tendencies, and the parallels between them (e.g. Róheim, 1934: 387). As he put it in one book, “the evolution of culture is a special process comparable to the growth of an individual to [psychosexual] maturity” (Róheim, 1940: 252); in another, he noted that, “the savage is psychologically a child while we are something different... For want of a better word we may call this state of things ‘being adult’” (Róheim, 1934: 412). For Róheim, this meant that such uncivilized savages – and the Hungarian and Eastern European peasants he constantly grouped with them in his analyses of their similar myths and folktales – were not only evolutionarily equivalent primitives, they were, in fact, not fully human: “[It is] the development of the super-ego which differentiates man from his animal brethren... The latency period, which is the time of full super-ego formation in our own civilization, is absent or only faintly indicated among the most primitive races of mankind.” (Róheim, 1934: 405).

Thus, in his 1919 book Mirror Magic, Róheim examined folk beliefs gathered from all over the world about mirrors as magical devices for prophecy, rulership, and love, as sources of bad luck when broken, and as astrological symbols of the sun and moon, to show how such beliefs revealed the centrality of narcissism in folk culture – an infantile sexual stage which Róheim and Freudian theory explicitly opposed to normal, fully developed adult sexuality. In a sense, Róheim was asserting that such narcissism was part of the universal roots of folk life, reflecting the shared origins of the human sexual psyche. Yet despite his use of examples of folklore and custom from across Europe, here, too, the core of Róheim’s interpretation of these universal customs as specifically narcissistic was empirically grounded in detailed readings of a blend of Hungarian and Finno-Ugric folk tales about and beliefs in mirror-magic, and the similar beliefs and practices of non-European primitive peoples. The sexually and psychologically “infantile” character, and “arrested psycho-sexual development” he attributed to these “universal” human psycho-sexual origins were thus most visibly embodied by the
homogenized practices of ancestral Hungarian folk customs and non-European cultures.

The essence and implications of this reading are evident in Röheim’s final, posthumous book, *Hungarian and Vogul Mythology*, in which he concludes that the fundamental national character of the Hungarians, embodied in their ancestral tribal god, is in fact the *libido* (Röheim, 1954: 68). For Röheim, Hungarian peasants, like other primitive peoples possessing similar beliefs, were thus representatives of the originary, infantile sexual unconscious of humanity – that which most clearly revealed it: the “mirror,” in fact, reflecting the early formative conditions and unresolved conflicts that the sexually and socially more developed “adult” world of modern, Western Europe had outgrown. As Röheim once described the magical world of folktales: “The world in which the unheard of . . . can happen is an underworld (the unconscious) – a world totally different from sober reality” (Röheim, 1992 [1946]: 71). This was a world, clearly, from which for Röheim, these folk tales and magical, primitive beliefs, and the unconscious, ungoverned and irrational desires at their hearts, most visibly emerged: the conjoined world of Hungarian and Eastern European folk culture and non-European peoples, and their shared difference from the modern West.

**Sexual science and the European mirror of (homo)phobia**

Scientific visions of sexuality, and its study and management, were central to the construction of modernity and its Others. Particularly important in these processes were the medical-scientific discourses and institutions through which modern biopower’s new forms of subjectivity and embodiment, and new relations of selfhood and otherness, were mapped (Foucault, 1978; Weeks, 1985).

While Foucault and many historians of modern sexuality emphasized relations of power in the West, ethnographic representations of Europe’s geographic Others were vital to the constitution of these new discourses and practices. As Ann Stoler (1995) and Rudi Bleys (1995) have demonstrated, non-European Others played critical roles in the fashioning of European sexualities and their political meanings. Noting that the constitution of a complex grid of raced and sexual Others in the frictions of colonial encounters was vital to the scientific system of social, political, and moral categories that “served to secure and delineate the authentic, first-class citizens of the nation-state” (1995: 11), Stoler reveals the colonial encounter’s scientific representation and management of sexuality as foundational to the biopolitical concept of the civilized, modern European subject-citizen. Other researchers have highlighted how ethnographic fascination with non-Western sexualities was critical to the development of the key medical-scientific disciplines of sexology and psychology, as sexologists such as Krafft-Ebing, Hirschfeld, and others, made anthropological and ethnographic data, and the geographic boundaries they established, central to not only the formulation of modern biopolitical concepts such as “the sodomite” and “the homosexual” (H Bauer, 2010; J Bauer, 2011; Bleys, 1995; Somerville, 1997), but to foundational scientific categories such as “taboo” and
“repression” (Scherer, 2005). The naturalized structures of sexual-scientific intelligibility critical to Foucauldian “regimes of truth” thus also relied fundamentally on geographic distinctions.

**Phobia and the (European) sexual Other**

Ethnographic comparisons also legitimized the Freudian psychoanalytic theories at the root of Röheim’s analyses. Frank Scherer has argued that Freud’s theories were suffused by “a pervasive Orientalist presence”; a “conceptual geography” closely related to broader orientalist discourses (2005: 2), grounding foundational concepts like the Unconscious in terms already ubiquitous in imperial and colonial orientalist discourses: “timelessness, and replacement of external reality by psychical reality ... are the characteristics which we may expect to find in processes belonging to the system Ucs. [Unconscious]” (Freud, 1981 [1915]: 186–187, cited in Scherer, 2005: 3). Similarly, Valerie Rohy notes that for Freud, primitive races were “atavistic embodiments” of simultaneously psychological and civilizational pasts, particularly in terms of their sexualities (2009: 10). These are the same geotemporal characterizations we have already seen at work in Röheim’s magical world of Hungarian and Eastern European folk Otherness.

One of the scientific concepts shaped in this way was the central Freudian theory of “phobias” – a concept, like the terms “sodomite” and “homosexual” themselves, foundational to the present-day term “homophobia.” Although Freud based his theory of phobias on a number of cases and examples, much of his ultimate understanding of their meaning and significance emerged from the extended cross-cultural comparison between primitives, neurotics and children, and modern, adult, civilized people and society that he undertook in his 1913 book *Totem and Taboo*. Seeking to discover the psycho-sexual logic behind the practice of totemism – a key cultural element distinguishing primitive from modern society in contemporary social typologies – Freud focused his analysis on specifically sexual phobias. Noting that children, especially boys, develop powerful feelings of fear and hatred, tensely mingled with love and admiration, for their fathers as part of Oedipal rivalries, Freud drew attention to parallels between children’s animal phobias, which combine fear and attraction, and the tense combination of strict taboos and sacred obligations of exogamy and incest avoidance governing Australian indigenous peoples’ identification with their totemic animals (1913). Whereas normal, and modern civilized, people, Freud argued, eventually resolved these ambivalent emotions, and successfully negotiated the Oedipal stage, or left the totemic societal stage behind, both phobic children and totemic peoples were unable to “effect a clear-cut severance between the affectionate and the hostile feelings. On the contrary, the conflict is resumed in relation to the object on to which the displacement has been made: the ambivalence is extended to it” (1913: 129). For Freud, in precisely the same way that repression was necessary to achieve adulthood, it was necessary for the development of civilization (2004 [1930]). Both phobias and totemism therefore represented failure to properly resolve Oedipal
conflicts and their cosmological equivalents, and move on to states of psychosexual or social-civilizational maturity. Primitive culture thus reveals the sexual dynamics at the heart of both individual psychological and civilizational development: as Röheim himself put it in connection with his own research, much as Hungarian national character is the (unrepressed) libido, “the [Australian] totemic cult is the fully developed Oedipus complex, with castration symbolism and obsessional ritual” (1934: 416).12

For Freud and his followers (as well as much of post-Freudian popular understanding) phobias and the capacity to overcome them thus became central measures of not only proper individual sexual-psychic development and maturity, but primary determinants of societal positioning in social evolutionary hierarchies. In this way the presence or absence of “phobia” came to function both as a powerful marker of the boundary between the “arrested,” failed, phobic primitive self and the unafraid and accepting modern, civilized self; the means to distinguish between primitive, non-modern societies – characterized by their failure to resolve such phobias, revealed by persisting primitive belief structures such as totemism – and societies which had succeeded in moving beyond them to more advanced social stages. The notion of “phobia,” so central to present-day conceptions of “homophobia, was thus shaped at its core by geographical, evolutionary, and civilizational borders surrounding sexual tensions and their management.

**Eastern European sexual Others**

At essentially the same time as the imperial and colonial encounters described by Bleys and Stoler, representations of sex and sexuality were serving as critical hinges of the ethnographic accounts of Eastern European Others that Wolff and Todorova term crucial to imagining the modern European West. Wolff depicts the horror of some Western European travelers who encountered the “primitive promiscuity” of Eastern Europe’s “state of nature,” and how the everyday interactions of others were mediated by both sexuality and the moral hierarchies they saw between themselves, as civilized Europeans, and the violent, primitive passions of Easterners. For Enlightenment travelers and *philosophes* writing about Eastern Europe, sexuality was a proof of shared human nature, but also a critical marker of fundamental differences in that nature – and the West’s superior reason and self-control (Wolff, 1994).

Röheim’s construction of the conjoined cultural practices of Hungarian folk tradition and “primitive” non-European societies as key sites of the human psyche’s originary sexual fears and tensions thus applied the orientalist assumptions of Freudian theories about the civilizational boundaries between European and non-European psyche and society to another set of scientific-geographic distinctions: the internal borders of European difference. Mirroring Freud’s sexual and social evolutionary assumptions, Roheim’s repetitive corroboration confirmed and reinforced them as “facts” in Latour’s sense (1987, 1993), incorporating them into scientific knowledge about Eastern Europe. Röheim’s work was thus part of a
set of interlinked scientific narratives which constructed Eastern Europe as the West’s Other; as a “factish” (Latour, 2011) realm of originary, unchanging phobias, a naturalized space of personal and societal insecurity. More than mere geographical distinctions and borders were at work here, however: people and their characteristics and capabilities were constituted by these discourses as well. If, as Stoler has argued, such processes of sexual Othering were in fact central to the constitution of modern biopolitics’ new technologies of subjectification and governance, then these intersecting productions of scientific knowledge effected far more than naturalized differences between European worlds: boundaries between unconscious, primitive Hungarian and other Eastern European folk cultures and modern (Western) Europe’s “adult” rationality. They also demarcated a powerful evolutionary geography of modern belonging, rendering Hungary a realm of undeveloped subjects and immature citizens, in ways that further confirm and reinforce as “factish” broader discourses of Eastern European backwardness.

From phobia to homophobia

As a term that visibly betrays its epistemological foundations in late 19th-century sexual science, “homophobia” relies profoundly on these deeper meanings of phobia, the psychological concept at its core. The more recent processes within which the concept of homophobia emerged have reinforced key aspects of these historical meanings. According to Daniel Wickberg (2000), the new term resulted from a complex process of specific post-Second World War cultural construction: despite its apparent distinctness, it was in fact an extension of liberal postwar notions of race and gender prejudice, and shared their fundamental individualizing and psychologizing assumptions (Wickberg, 2000). The emergence in the 1970s of homophobia as a specific concept, then, and its eventual incorporation into globally dominant discourses of rights, were determined not only by the broader structures of psychic and civilizational difference established by Freud, but also by highly salient categories of racial (and, though less visibly, sexual) hatreds, fears, and genocide rooted directly in recent internal European conflict.

It is through these intersecting scientific, geographic, and political histories, then, that “phobia” more generally, the concept of “[h]omophobia…has been naturalized as a set of understandable psychological structures that everyone has…but that reasonable people resist and try to come to terms with” (Kulick, 2009: 24) – linked specifically to civilizational categories such as “reason.” As a scientific term also connecting individual psychological reactions to their mass social expression (Wickberg, 2000), homophobia came to signal not merely personal, psychological failure, but a wider failure of the capacity for reason and civilization – and to stand as a particularly resonant sign of the failed modern, civilized, tolerant European self.

Thus, like other aspects of sexuality, homophobia takes its meanings not only from a psychological, individualized framework, as many have argued, nor primarily from its social and public nature (Murray, 2009; Sedgwick, 1990;
Wickberg, 2000), but from a profoundly scientific, taxonomic history, in which it marks critical evolutionary distinctions between societies, regions, and their inhabitants. Indeed, it is precisely this simultaneous existence on multiple levels, individual and social, masked by claims of innate individuality, which makes homophobia such a quintessentially biopolitical concept, linking societies and selves, and their hierarchies. These biopolitical geographies constitute a critical part of the process through which postsocialist homophobia attains its status as a certain kind of “fact.”

Postsocialist homophobia in the scientific mirror

Society itself in the East has been stunted and distorted to a greater degree than in the West. These societies have then acted as an ugly mirror image of the West.

(Burgess, 1997: 141)

After 10 years of peaceful marching, violent attacks by nationalists, neo-Nazis, and skinheads on the 2007 Budapest Pride March, and further attacks or threats of violence every year since, brought Hungary into conformance with a broader regional pattern of mass homophobic violence in the 2000s, including attacks on LGBT marches in almost every postsocialist country. This trend also stimulated a proliferation of discourse about the problem of homophobia in Eastern Europe, and its implications for the broader postsocialist condition.

Elsewhere, I have described how Hungarian LGBT people and activism are often positioned, and position themselves, on a universal, unilineal scale of progress, depicted as essentially similar to LGBT people and politics elsewhere, but backwards: as it is frequently phrased, “20 [or 30, or 40] years behind the West.” Similar evolutionary assumptions shape popular and political discourses about Hungary’s recent surge in mass, public homophobia as well, invoking the “primitivity” of the march’s homophobic attackers, Hungary’s lack of societally “normal” efforts to protect LGBT rights, and its “retardation” and non-“Europeanness” (Renkin, n.d.).

Such orientalizing and evolutionist views are not confined to popular and political rhetorics: they characterize dominant scholarly and scientific research on postsocialist sexualities and sexual politics as well (while Hungary plays an important role in these, for the most part it is simply another example confirming longstanding narratives of the postsocialist region’s broader tendencies and, indeed, its existence as a region). Much scholarly-scientific work on postsocialist sexualities roots its analysis in one of two contrasting, but equally evolutionary assumptions: that postsocialist gays are essentially the same as Western gays, but simply “behind” them, still in the initial stages of an inevitable process of development of self-awareness, consciousness, and community (Stulhofer and Sandfort, 2005; Takács, 2004; Tóth, 1994), or that they are fundamentally different, either in their fluid, anti-identitarian sexualities (Essig, 1999) or their distinctly non-Western,
queer temporalities (Kulpa and Mizielska, 2011). Both readings of sexual similarity or difference are used to explain differences between Western and postsocialist sexual politics: as the causes of the latter’s “failure” (Essig, 1999), slowed development (Štulhofer and Sandfort, 2005; Takács, 2004; Tóth, 1994), or promising alterity (Kulpa and Mizielska, 2011).

These perspectives are mirrored by the proliferation of scholarship responding to the recent surge in postsocialist homophobia. They inform analyses tracing homophobia’s roots to psychological pathology and irrational fears and hatreds (Graff, 2006; O’Dwyer and Schwartz, 2010), and socio-cultural interpretations which see its source in nationalist sentiments long left behind by the modern West (Kulpa, 2011; Waitt, 2005). They also underlie the binary distinctions informing the conclusions of many studies, such as the Friedrich Ebert Foundation’s 2011 “Intolerance, Prejudice, Discrimination: A European Report” which, while noting that “group-focused enmity” (a “syndrome of interlinked negative attitudes and prejudices towards groups identified as ‘other,’ ‘different’ or ‘abnormal,’” and which includes homophobia as a key indicator) is “widespread in Europe,” warns that it is “strongest in Poland and Hungary” (Zick et al:13), and consistently constructs its imagining of “European” attitudes upon comparisons between the relative tolerance of Western countries like the Netherlands and the intolerant prejudice of countries like Poland and Hungary. Critically, while in such studies, issues such as “anti-immigrant prejudice” are marked as general problems for European tolerance, “homophobia” tends to be presented as a particularly Eastern concern.13 The reproduction of geographic and civilizational boundaries by such scientific studies is evident in the report’s use of surveys of individual attitudes to determine “whether a society is for or against tolerance, diversity and integration” (Zick et al., 2011: 16).

Strikingly similar fundamental assumptions undergird (and justify) another important domain of social science research: the burgeoning industry of European Union homophobia surveys. In a typical recent example, sociologist Jürgen Gerhards (2010) posits homophobia as a fundamentally different and greater problem in the EU’s new Central and Eastern European member states. This, he argues, is the consequence of the geographic organization of a fundamental temporal distinction: insufficiently “modernized,” these nations are too rooted in the “traditional” cultural values of the past. As a result, “one may conclude that support for non-discrimination towards homosexuals will increase if new EU member states go through a period of modernization similar to that of the old member states” (Gerhards, 2010: 22).

Identical boundaries (and boundary production) underlie explanations by political scientists Conor O’Dwyer and Katrina Schwartz (2010) of the particular intensity of homophobia in postsocialist countries like Latvia and Poland. Depicting the problem as “the failure to internalize European norms – that is, to ‘europeanize’” (2010: 222), they trace this failure, and the persistent domination of homophbic attitudes in such countries, to the fact that “Illiberalism toward sexual minorities has deep roots in many of the new member-states” (2010: 222), and that
until recently, communism’s deep cultural conservatism trapped Eastern Europeans in the past, “encasing traditional, recently peasant-based social practices in ‘neo-Victorianism’” (2010: 222). The authors recognize that “the treatment of sexual minorities varies widely among the ‘old’ member-states” (2010: 233). Yet, because it highlights the problem’s salience in postsocialist countries while downplaying Western homophobia – both through comparison of the East’s endemic homophobia to “EU norms of nondiscrimination toward sexual minorities” (2010: 240) and assumptions that “europeanization” (like modernization) means tolerance – such scientific knowledge produces Europe’s East as not only a particular site of homophobic intolerance, but also a space of failed, non-modern, non-European societies.

These scientific accounts figure postsocialist homophobia as a diagnostic indicator, symptomatic of a condition that results from, but also confirms, the failure of Eastern Europeans to move properly – in their management of sexuality – from primitive past to modern European present. Such assumptions and judgments reaffirm the overlapping boundaries of geography and temporality, and citizens and societies, created both within the broader context of European and non-European encounter, and the work of figures such as Freud and Röheim. The knowledge these works produce thus both renews the biopolitical geographies of previous scientific narratives, and reinforces their effects. The result is the continual reconstruction of Eastern Europe as a Latourian “black box” of social-evolutionary difference: a particular, unquestioned space of both homophobia and what it has historically, and scientifically, been constituted to indicate: individual sexual-psychic immaturity and societal primitivity; failure of both self and civilization.

**Conclusion: The biopolitical mythology of homophobia**

Homophobic discourses are a critical component of the production of moral universes. (Murray, 2009: 189)

Recently, David Murray has urged us to “critically examine ... homophobia as an analytical concept and as a cross-cultural, transnational phenomenon,” calling for “an analytical dismantling of the essentialist, naturalizing, and ethnocentric assumptions contained in much of this term’s everyday use” (Murray, 2009: 2). Murray joins a range of voices pointing to the dominance of psychologized, individualized understandings of homophobia, and urging its reinterpretation as a social and public phenomenon (e.g. Sedgwick, 1990; Renkin, 2009; Wickberg, 2000).

In this article I have argued that understanding the historical relationships between science, sexuality, geography, and temporality is crucial to thinking effectively about what “homophobia” is and does. The complexly interwoven stories of Röheim’s science of folk sexual-psychology, Freud’s orientalizing production of “phobia,” and the social-scientific construction of postsocialist homophobia
explored here reveal that the sexual-scientific fabrications at the core of our current concept of homophobia have, historically, been neither simply individual nor merely social, but instead have been shaped by a wide range of interlocking social, spatial, and temporal distinctions. Homophobia, then, is thus not just about sexuality, or sexual politics (or even national or transnational politics, as many have argued): its scientifically constructed signification on multiple levels – individual, societal, and intersocietal, spatial and temporal – makes it a quintessentially biopolitical concept, marking critically overlapping borders between psyches, people, and sentiments, but also between geographic regions and civilizational stages. The historical overlapping of scientific narratives of Eastern European psychic and social-evolutionary difference with other scientific geographies of sexual and civilizational difference fabricates both as “black boxes” naturalizing the boundaries they inscribe, and rendering them “factish” and hegemonic. Critically, because such scientific fictions lie at the very heart of modern biopolitics, they have also functioned to suture these borders of difference to others: those of modern subjection and citizenship. They have therefore contributed to the ongoing imagining of Hungary and other Eastern European countries as places inhabited by naturally failed citizens: people insecurely modern and civilized, unlike those in the “sexually tolerant West.”

Scholars of postsocialist neo-orientalisms have argued that their symbolic geographies mask and displace the failings of the West, thus legitimizing its domination of the East (Böröcz, 2006; Buchowski, 2006; Burgess, 1997; Wolff, 1994). Similarly, geographies of postsocialist homophobia locate homophobia “elsewhere,” constituting the West as the “space of tolerance,” and obscuring its systematic homophobia and limited tolerance (Renkin, n.d.). The sexual-scientific stories of Róheim and Freud suggest that homophobia is not merely, as Don Kulick has claimed, “a Western concept” (Kulick, 2009: 21): as we have seen, both “phobia” and “homophobia,” as well as the concept of “the homosexual” itself, are deeply rooted in historical comparisons to non-European Others, and central to present comparisons to Eastern European Others. In another way, however, they prove Kulick right: like other orientalizing forms of knowledge, phobia, homophobia, and their historically associated meanings are, in both past and present, concepts critical to defining the modern West against its Others. Homophobia is thus – in “fact” – a very Western concept indeed.

Recently, Bruno Latour (2011) has argued that the scientific “facts” of the modern West fundamentally resemble in process and function the primitive “fetishes” against which both scientists and the West for so many centuries defined the very idea of modernity, and themselves. Just as Róheim’s folk tales and Freud’s phobic, totemic beliefs were denominated by their modern, psychoanalytical and ethnographic sciences mere fetishized objects, revealing the primitivity of their believers, Latour suggests, all scientific fabrications (including the distinction between “fetish” and “fact” itself) are “factishes” – founding myths of modernity – myths critical to both its construction and domination.
Through its production in the overlapping scientific inscriptions of boundaries of sexual immaturity and maturity, social primitivity and modernity, and non-Europeanness and Europeanness—entangled, mutually-reinforcing tales of sexuality, space, and time—explored here, the widespread belief that homophobia is at once pre-modern and postsocialist, and thus fundamentally a non-Western, non-“European” problem, has become a new myth, justifying, like all mythologies, relations of power and domination.

Building upon the foundations of previous scientific narratives, and creating further entanglements of past and present fabrication, discourses of postsocialist homophobia serve to constitute much more than merely “moral” discourses, but “factish” realms—the biopolitical mythologies of the modern West. It is this that truly masks the presence of homophobia in the West, and its significance in the East. Thus, in considering the problem of postsocialist homophobia, the question is not really so much whether homophobia is an Eastern or a Western problem, or even whether homophobes are proper modern European subjects. Rather, it is how the particular social, political, and historical phenomenon of postsocialist homophobia comes to function as a “fact” of a certain kind: inherent to and indicative of the “deeply-rooted nature” of not only Europe’s East, but of Europe’s West, and productive of the profound and persistent hierarchies between their societies and citizens.

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Notes

1. As their analysts have consistently noted, in many ways all these discourses construct postsocialist East Europe as a homogenized region. While in this article I frequently focus on Hungarian examples, I argue that these function to weave the specific site of postsocialist Hungary, and its sexual politics (including homophobia) into broader—and longstanding—binary structures dividing Europe’s “East” and “West.” I thus use the terms “Eastern Europe” and “Western Europe” throughout to refer to these discursively imagined and mutually constituted regions.

2. Melegh (2006) is a rare exception linking scientific discourses about Eastern Europe to postsocialist neo-orientalisms. Only mentioning sexuality in passing, however, Melegh fails to explore its particular significance for naturalizing European difference.


4. Róheim’s direct scholarly impact is a matter of some debate (Dundes, 1992). It is, however, my argument here that it is his position at the center of such important scientific discursive intersections, his embodiment—through his theoretical connection to Freud, his rooting in contemporary scientific geographies of folk and cultural difference, and the particular methodological and analytical practices through which he brought these scientific traditions together—of broader patterns of understanding such differences, rather than his direct influence, that make his work a valuable site for exploration, exemplary of
the intersections through which overlapping scientific narratives confirm one another, and the borders they produce, as “factual.”

5. For a few other examples of the diverse nature of Róheim’s scholarly interests, see, for example, Róheim, 1913b, 1926a, 1926b, 1950, 1952.

6. Róheim does argue that Greek folklore data are “significant” here – while categorizing them clearly as part of “the sphere of Greek oriental culture” (1992 [1946]: 50, emphasis mine).

7. While some have argued that Róheim, opposing contemporary ethnographers’ assertions of Hungarian culture’s Finno-Ugric roots, saw shamanism as fundamentally Slavic in origin, part of “European” folk tradition (Sozan, 1977), or highlight tensions between Róheim’s views of Slavic and Asiatic (Finno-Ugric or Turkic) origins (Kürti, 2000), not only did Róheim’s earliest efforts trace the remnants of Hungarian shamanic traditions to uniquely Finno-Ugric customs (Róheim, 1912), his final, posthumous book argued that Hungarian folk culture’s deepest roots were distinctly Finno-Ugric (Róheim, 1954). Moreover, and critically, whether “Slavic,” “Turkic,” or “Finno-Ugric,” in the symbolic mappings of “Europe” that have persisted from the Enlightenment to the present day, these were all constitutive Eastern Others of the modern West (Wolff, 1994).

8. There is no question that class is also a key component in these constructions, and that peasants, like other lower-class groups, were constituted by them as sites of internal European primitivity, and psycho-sexual immaturity – as Others of European modernity. Many scholars, however, have explored the intersection of concepts of sexual primitivity with categories of class, nation, and race (e.g. Caplan, 1999; Groneman, 1995; Mosse, 1985; Rohy, 2009; Somerville, 1997); I argue here that these intersections also underpin powerful overlapping, but also cross-cutting, geographical distinctions between Europe’s East and West.

9. The “we” here calls for some comment. As an urban, educated Jew, Róheim belonged to a group long defined as a European Other – and specifically associated with excessive sexuality and modernity (Mosse, 1985). As such, his relationship to the classifications of sexualized, primitive Otherness he was depicting was complex: for many, he could never be a full part of the Hungarian nation whose origins and sexual-psychic status he was tracing – particularly since that nation’s essential character was so closely linked to rural peasant culture, in part by his own scientific work (see Note 11). Thus, the “we” here may represent Róheim’s own (not entirely voluntary) alignment with “modern civilization.”

10. Though cryptic, this observation is in fact critical: as Bunzl has argued, in the Humboldtian schema from within which the foundational assumptions of folk ethnography and psychology emerged, national character most truly “revealed the degree of Bildung attained by a given nation” (Bunzl, 1996: 22).

11. That we are talking here about differences in “worlds”, and not merely the differences and characteristics of peasants, is made clear by the ways in which, precisely through the scientific representations of the national folklore and folk ethnography dominant in the late-19th and early 20th-century Europe, “the peasant” was constituted as the fundamental essence of the nation, whose customs revealed the nation’s truest character (Stauter-Halsted, 2004; Turda, 2004).

12. For the centrality of Freud’s evolutionary treatment of “savages” to his theorizing in Totem and Taboo, see Fuss, 1995.

13. The Ebert Report does present Southern European nations such as Portugal and Italy as between the Eastern European countries of Poland and Hungary and Western European countries in the strength of their homophobic attitudes (Zick et al., 2011: 64). Nonetheless, in the more general framing of the Report, this scale is minimized.
14. As we have seen in the case of Roheim himself, of course, and as much work on the complex shadings of “nested orientalisms” has demonstrated, such Otherings are not always uniform, but are bitterly contested, with some people and groups claiming privileged, modern and civilized status, and “European” character, at the expense of others (Bakić-Hayden, 1995). Nonetheless, as both the scientific studies of postsocialist homophobia and the historical construction of East European difference demonstrate, they are often imagined and made material on broadly regional levels. Ironically, this ambiguity may in fact render citizenship itself doubly insecure, both because of its potential general failure, and because struggles over the boundaries of that failure are inevitable (Balibar, 2009).

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